

## COLOMBIA UPDATE – AUTUMN 2010

### *Grupo Raíces – the Irish Colombia Solidarity Group*

#### **Uribe departs – but repression continues**

When Alvaro Uribe stood down as president of Colombia in August 2010, the BBC's correspondent claimed that the right-wing leader "may go down as one of Colombia's greatest presidents, with his policies for tackling guerrillas and drug-traffickers now a permanent fixture in the country." According to the reporter, one "simple fact" stands out from his time in power: "President Uribe made Colombia a safer place." This sort of bland, dishonest PR spin is what we've come to expect from the western media in its reporting on Alvaro Uribe: they are so desperate to find something good to say about Washington's most dependable ally in the region that they will ignore all the scandals that have accumulated under Uribe's presidency.

The facts tell a very different story. As president, Alvaro Uribe presided over one of the darkest periods in Colombian history. Paramilitary death squads were given amnesty although they continued to rape, torture and kill their victims. Trade unionists and human rights defenders were demonised by the government as "accomplices of terrorism". Civilians were killed by the Colombian army in huge numbers, while journalists and magistrates who investigated the abuse of human rights were spied on by the president's intelligence service. Uribe brought Colombia to the brink of a regional war to divert attention from the scandals which beset him, and ensured that there will be no end to its long domestic conflict for years to come.

#### **War on the guerrillas, peace with the death squads**

Much discussion of Uribe's record is distorted by a false image of the Colombian civil war. According to this view, Colombia lacks peace and democracy because left-wing guerrillas have taken up arms against the state. By weakening the guerrillas, Uribe has made the country more peaceful than it was before he took office. But this argument turns reality on its head. The civil war did not begin

when the FARC or the ELN took up arms. For decades, the Colombian elite has been using violence to crush opposition movements that demand a more just social order. This was happening long before the current guerrilla forces came into being. In the past, guerrilla movements have demobilised and established legal political parties, only to see their activists wiped out by state and paramilitary terror. If the FARC was defeated, it would not mean that Colombia's conflict was over: it would just mean that one of the parties to that conflict had been eliminated, while the state and its paramilitary allies continued to use violence against civilian social movements.



One of the main initiatives of Uribe's first term in office was the "Justice and Peace Law", which offered an amnesty to right-wing paramilitaries in exchange for demobilisation. It is vital to remember that this was a peace deal between friends, not enemies. The right-wing death squads emerged as a major force in Colombian politics in the 1980s and '90s with the blessing of the state. They carried out massacres and assassinations while the army and the police looked the other way (often, the members of paramilitary groups were off-duty soldiers or policemen). The paramilitaries were responsible for the vast majority of human rights violations in Colombia, and were major players in the cocaine

industry. By the time Uribe took power, the main paramilitary bosses had become very wealthy through drugs and other criminal enterprises. They had also grabbed huge tracts of land by using terror to drive off small farmers. Uribe's amnesty gave them the chance to legalise their criminal fortunes and wipe the slate clean in return for mild sentences. Myles Frechette, the US ambassador to Colombia under the Clinton administration, described it as "an abomination".

During the 2002 election, Uribe had been described by the paramilitary leader Carlos Castano as "the man closest to our philosophy". Like the paramilitaries, Uribe demonised all opponents of the status quo in Colombia as "terrorists" or "terrorist sympathisers". The rhetoric of Uribe and his ministers made it easier for the death squads to murder trade union leaders, journalists or lawyers. When Uribe ran for a second term in 2006, the still-active paramilitaries threatened that there would be a bloodbath if Uribe's opponent won the election, and "disappeared" people campaigning for the opposition in their strongholds.

By the time Uribe stood down, it was clear that the "Justice and Peace Law" had proved to be a farce – just as his critics always said it would be. As Amnesty International reported in their 2010 Colombia report:

**"Paramilitary groups continued to operate in many parts of the country, sometimes in collusion with sectors of the security forces. Their continued activities belied government claims that all paramilitaries had laid down their arms following a government-sponsored demobilization programme that began in 2003. The government claimed that violence attributed to these groups was solely drug-related and criminal in nature. However, the tactics employed by these groups to terrorize the civilian population, including death threats and massacres, reflected those used by paramilitary groups prior to demobilization. Human rights defenders, community leaders and other social activists continued to be targeted by such groups."**

Meanwhile the conflict with the guerrillas has continued. Media hype which suggested that the FARC were facing imminent defeat has been discredited by events: the guerrillas may be weaker now than a decade ago, but their insurgency has lasted since the 1960s, with ebbs and flows in that period, and there is no reason to think they will simply disappear. By insisting that the conflict with the FARC can be resolved by purely military means, Uribe has guaranteed that it will continue for years to come.

## **Para-politics, “false positives” and the DAS**

Given the close practical and ideological relationship between Uribe’s government and the paramilitaries, it did not come as a huge surprise when courageous magistrates began uncovering direct links between his coalition and the death squads. More than sixty pro-Uribe members of Congress have been investigated for collaborating with the paramilitaries, with many facing criminal charges. These includes Mario Uribe, the president’s cousin and a close political ally of his. One of the most notable targets of the investigation was Jorge Noguera, the head of the DAS (an intelligence service that answers directly to the president). Noguera was charged with passing on the details of labour activists compiled by the DAS to paramilitaries so the trade unionists could be targeted and killed. Noguera had been Uribe’s campaign manager in the Magdalena province when he first ran for the presidency and had been appointed to his post by the new president. It was in the midst of the “para-politics” affair that Alvaro Uribe ordered the raid on a FARC camp in Ecuadorian territory which almost provoked a regional war in Latin America: his sabre-rattling provided a convenient distraction from the revelations on the home front.

Noguera’s arrest was not the last scandal involving the DAS under Uribe. In 2009, the current affairs magazine *Semana* exposed the surveillance of Colombian citizens by the DAS: targets of this domestic spying included supreme-court judges, opposition politicians, journalists, army officers and human rights activists. One of the main victims of DAS surveillance was Ivan Velasquez, the chief investigator in the para-politics scandal. In a three-month period, 1,900 of his phone conversations were logged; investigators working with Velasquez were also spied on, along with their families. Another subject of DAS snooping was Uribe’s opponent in the 2006 election.

Equally revealing of the true state of affairs in Colombia was the “false positives” controversy. It emerged that the Colombian army had been systematically murdering civilians, then dressing their bodies in the uniforms of guerrillas so that they could be chalked up as “kills” in the counter-insurgency war. The number of victims was initially estimated at 2,000, but this figure had to be increased when a mass grave was discovered outside an army base in La Macarena. There are approximately 2,000 bodies in this one grave alone. The army has admitted responsibility for the grave, claiming that the dead people are all guerrillas who were killed in combat. Since the bodies were buried in secret without being identified, in defiance of protocol for handling bodies of those killed by the Colombian military, it is safe to assume that the army is lying. La

Macarena may not be the last dumping ground of “false positives” to be uncovered.

True to form, Alvaro Uribe paid a visit to La Macarena during the final months of his presidency: not to visit the mass grave, but to give his full backing to the army. Uribe denounced those investigating the grave as “terrorist spokespeople” and urged the army to “stay firm”. Jhonny Hurtado, one of the human rights activists investigating La Macarena, had already been murdered in an area patrolled by soldiers. As a last attention-seeking gesture before relinquishing power, Uribe filed a suit at the International Criminal Court, accusing the Venezuelan government of supporting the FARC. By rights, he should have been sitting in the ICC’s dock himself, charged with crimes against humanity during his brutal reign.

### **Uribe’s invented popularity**

Few articles about Uribe have lacked a reference to his supposedly overwhelming popularity. Figures of 65%, 75% or even 80% have been bandied about. Yet this ignores the dubious methodology of the opinion polls which measured Uribe’s standing among the Colombian people. The main polling agency, Invamer-Gallup, bases its polls on interviews conducted in the four largest Colombian cities: Bogota, Medellin, Barranquilla, and Cali. Less than a third of Colombia’s population lives in these areas. The views of rural Colombians – who have borne the brunt of the country’s civil war – are ignored. It must also be remembered that if somebody who lives in a rural area, or one of the urban slums, is asked what they think of a president who has the enthusiastic support of paramilitary death squads, they will hesitate before identifying themselves as an opponent of Uribe. People have been killed for less.

If Uribe’s popularity was really as great as the polls suggest, we would have expected to see it represented at the ballot box, with an overwhelming victory on a high turn-out. In fact, when Uribe ran for re-election in 2006, 55% of the electorate abstained: Uribe’s victory came with the support of a small minority of potential voters. There was a similar rate of abstention when his close ally Juan Manuel Santos won the battle to replace Uribe this year. Uribe and Santos were able to consolidate a strong base of support among the Colombian middle and upper classes, who credited them with weakening the guerrillas and pushing them back into the countryside. Greater security for these social groups was achieved at the price of greater insecurity for the rural and urban poor. The rest of the population has been effectively disenfranchised by the decades-long

campaign of terror against social movements. Thousands of activists who could have formed the backbone of a political alternative to what Uribe represents have been murdered, leaving behind an organisational vacuum.

Against this background, it would be naïve to hope for sudden improvements now that Uribe has left office. The paramilitary bloc has lost none of its potency, and the Colombian army is more determined than ever to protect itself from legal investigation. Yet the fact that brave magistrates, human rights defenders and journalists have dared to expose the abuses of Uribe's regime at great risk to themselves is a hopeful sign for Colombia's future. If the cloud of terror is lifted from Colombian society, there are many outstanding people ready to give a lead to struggles for a better Colombia.

## **Former Colombian president with bloody record of human rights abuses joins UN team investigating Israel**

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010, the Israeli government announced it would cooperate with one of two UN-sponsored investigations into the May 31<sup>st</sup> Flotilla Massacre – a move which UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon claimed was “unprecedented”. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Israel is only willing to cooperate with the inquiry because it expects the members of the UN commission to deliver a biased, inaccurate report that whitewashes the Israeli army.

The commission is composed of four people, one chosen by Turkey, one chosen by Israel and two chosen from a list provided from Israel. The latter two are New Zealand prime minister Geoffrey Palmer, who will be the Chair, and outgoing Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who will serve as Vice-Chair. **The choice of Mr Uribe is as perplexing as it is shocking, and casts doubt on the whole investigation.**

Alvaro Uribe has been a controversial president whose regime engaged in severe human rights abuses. The Colombian state has an ugly record of complicity with paramilitary death squads responsible for thousands of murders. Victims include trade unionists, peasant leaders, opposition politicians and human rights defenders. Over 4,000 trade union members have been assassinated since the 1980s, making Colombia by far the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. The Colombian army routinely murders civilians, then dresses their dead bodies in the uniforms of left-wing guerrillas (this is known as the “false positives” scandal). Colombia’s intelligence services have kept trade unionists and human rights defenders under illegal surveillance, and passed on information to the far-right paramilitaries so that these activists can be targeted and killed.

Public officials in Colombia constantly attack human rights defenders and members of the political and social opposition as “accomplices of terrorism”. These attacks create a climate in which such people can be murdered with impunity. Mr Uribe himself led the way as Colombian president, describing human rights NGOs as “*rent-a-mobs at the service of terrorism*”. Mr Uribe denounced Amnesty International (“*they give legitimacy to terrorism*”), and dubbed Human Rights Watch director José Miguel Vivanco “*a FARC defender*”.

*[and] accomplice*” when his organisation criticised Colombia’s record of human rights violations.

In June 2010, an international human rights mission in Colombia investigated the biggest mass grave in the Western Hemisphere, which had just been discovered in the town of La Macarena. It contained some 2,000 victims of extra-judicial execution that had been dumped there since 2004 – all during Mr Uribe’s time in office. At the same time, the Colombian president travelled to the area. However, Mr Uribe did not go to express his condolences to the victims’ families, nor to guarantee that a human rights investigation would determine what had happened there. Instead he went to visit the local military base – staffed by exactly the same people that, according to victims’ reports, had filled the mass grave with its grisly contents - to praise them for their work:

**“The terrorists’ spokespeople are talking of peace to have a break in order to recover, before we achieve our final victory. Terrorism combines means of struggle, so some of their spokespeople talk of peace; others come here to La Macarena to look for ways to discredit the Armed Forces and to implicate it in human rights violations. We will not fall into that trap, stay firm!”**

It is hard to believe that Mr Uribe has been selected to join a UN human rights commission despite his own appalling record.

It is also hard to believe that a representative of the Colombian state can be in any way impartial in relation to Israel. For many years, there have been close links between the military establishments of the two countries. The Israeli war industry is now the leading source of arms purchases for the Colombian army:

**“In recent years, Israel has become Colombia's number one weapon supplier [...] These weapons include drones, light arms and ammunition, observation and communication systems and even special bombs capable of destroying coca fields.”**

Both Israel and Colombia are among the world’s largest recipients of US military aid. The two states have the same ideological approach to their respective conflicts, insisting that respect for human rights is a non-issue when it comes to pursuing their military goals against rebel groups. When Colombian foreign minister Jaime Bermúdez visited Israel in April 2010, he assured his hosts of continued support:

**“Whoever wins [Colombia’s] presidential election next month will be supportive of [Israel]. I admire your people. I admire your country and I admire you. You have many friends in Colombia.”**

There can be no doubt that Israel only agreed to co-operate with this particular UN inquiry as there is very little chance the commission will tell the truth about the Israeli attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. Indeed, Israel has declined to co-operate with the other UN commission into the attack appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. Colombian participation in a whitewash of the brutal murder of human rights activists will serve the military objectives of both Israel and Colombia as they seek to undermine human rights defenders and “enemy communities” in their respective countries.

In conclusion, it is our belief that this is a maverick commission lacking any serious credibility, and will serve only to show the influence of the United States and Israel on Mr. Ban Ki Moon’s office. The commission will disappoint anyone expecting a neutral, impartial investigation that reveals the truth about the massacre of May 31<sup>st</sup>.

*This statement was issued in August with the support of Grupo Raíces, the Latin America Solidarity Centre, the Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Debt and Development Coalition, the Centre for Global Education and Bloom – Movement for Global Justice.*

## **The Popular Unity Conference of the Coalition of Social Movements of Colombia**

**June 4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> 2010**

From June 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> some 350 delegates, representing 112 organisations from 46 towns and villages in 20 departments, met in Bosa, a popular district of Bogotá to discuss the political agenda of the Coalition of Social Movements (COMOSOC) and to see ways to turn solidarity into actions, explore ways to strengthen the movements and their political role as agents of change. Also, to see how its programme could be turned into a plan of action for the next 4 years, that can have a real impact at a grassroots level in the localities where the coalition exists.

COMOSOC is a coalition that expresses a process of unity from below of a wide range of movements: women, peasants, students, indigenous, Afro Colombians, Christian grassroots movements, unions, human rights organisations, civil rights associations, etc. There were also delegates from Ecuador, Brazil, Canada, Germany, France, Sweden and from Ireland one representative of Grupo Raíces (Grúpa Fréamhacha). The diversity of the people in the assembly, as well as the grassroots character of all of the delegates was a good proof of the organisational work carried all these years with little or no resources, but with plenty of commitment.

The meeting started with a march on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June for the right to health in Bosa, which was quite animated: there were some 500 people going around the district letting people know of the struggle to defend public health as a right in Colombia and not as a business for private insurance companies. The most interesting aspect of this mobilisation is that usually demonstrations like this happen in the centre and therefore the people in the suburbs (precisely those who are affected the most by regressive politics) often do not even know that there was a protest going on. Changing the location is quite a good way to put the message across to the people in their own neighbourhood.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, different commissions involving all of the delegates and participants, worked on the political programme of COMOSOC, as defined by numerous previous meetings and discussions by representatives from all over the country. It consists of 4 main areas – life with dignity (right to education, land, health, food, water, economic security, decent work, clean environment,

identity, political education, alternative agrarian development); territorial sovereignty (different political, economic, cultural and military aspects of it); real democracy (participatory democracy, popular democracy); political solution to the armed conflict (participation in a real peace process, to understand its origins and evolution, how the actors of the conflict interact and shape politics). The discussion was excellent and it has to be said that most of the people were clearer politically than many of the experts on Colombian social issues. Debate was intense at times, but you could realize that each one of the people that attended the meeting knew exactly why they were there and this says a lot of how the project of COMOSOC has been conducted, really from below.

On the 6th June, there was a platform for solidarity with different social movements, so they let the audience know of their struggles. There were representatives of various different struggles from the country, giving a picture of a country that has an awful lot of grassroots daily resistance to the anti-popular economic model imposed from above. Surely there is more coordination badly needed, and there is where COMOSOC comes in, but certainly there is a re-activation of the popular struggles over the last while, even if the vast majority of these struggles have a low profile.

Apart from enhancing the political programme of COMOSOC through debate, there was a number of priorities set for the future of COMOSOC: to conduct more actions towards political education and debate at the grassroots, the building of regional committees to implement at a local level the coalition's objectives, to strengthen the organisation as such and to mobilise the people for their rights as defined in the COMOSOC political agenda.

On the level of international solidarity, there was some debate on the role of international solidarity and how to tackle some of the problems of it. From our point of view, international solidarity is crucial, but we need to move beyond paternalistic stereotypes and identifying how to promote support between equals. In Raíces we have insisted that the "NGO-isation" of the social movements in Colombia has been quite detrimental to the people's struggles – how NGOs shape grassroots social movements to fit their own bureaucratic structures, and their inability to accept other logics such as those of participatory and direct democracy of social movements. More detrimental is sometimes the way in which NGOs look to impose their language and their agendas on the people: indeed, for the last while an awful lot of these non-governmental organisations do nothing but repeat ceaselessly the policies of rich government-

funders, and thus they have become an effective way to discipline social movements.

It was also mentioned that often the social movement in Colombia think of international solidarity in terms of Europe and the USA (again, usually from the point of view of looking for funders more than partners) and thus the more needed allies, other social movements in Latin America, play a relatively small role.

How will an experience like COMOSOC build direct solidarity with likely organisations, with brothers and sisters abroad who are also fighting for a better world from the grassroots? How can COMOSOC defend its political agenda without getting notions of alien agendas, imposed via NGOs, peddled in its own programme? Those were some of the questions we discussed as part of the international commission of support for COMOSOC.

**“The real problem is what kind of information we receive in Colombia”**

**Interview with Colombian journalist Hollman Morris**



Hollman Morris is a familiar name in Colombia, both for his TV programme *Contravía* (Countercurrent), which he has been directing for many years and represents a unique window to glimpse into the realities of the Colombian conflict, and also for the accusations and harassment which he has suffered from the State intelligence Agency (DAS) and former president Alvaro Uribe. In February, he was denounced on TV by Uribe as an “*accomplice to terrorism*” because of his coverage of the unilateral liberation of hostages by the FARC-EP, while the then-Defence Minister (now president), Juan Manuel Santos, said what he had done was tantamount to “*endorsing criminality*”.

After that, when the DAS phone tapping scandal broke out, it was discovered that the State intelligence was not only tapping phone conversations of the

opposition, journalists, social movements, judges and human rights lawyers, etc., but also they had been followed, photographed and their personal lives were being scrutinised. Hollman Morris was among those suffering from this persecution. Apart from all this, Morris' work is done under constant threat and pressure from far-right paramilitary gangs that do not forgive him for his research on political violence in Colombia.

The situation of Morris is not an exception, even though his international and national profile makes his drama more visible than most. To be a journalist in Colombia is not easy: over the last 30 years, more than 130 journalists have been killed because of their profession, 98 of them being killed in the period of 1992-2006. During that time, many more journalists were forced to flee the country. Of this 98 cases, only 3 went punished. Colombia, according to Journalists Without Borders, ranks 126 in a ranking of those countries with the least freedom of information, among a total of 175 countries.

### **Please tell us about the current state of journalism in Colombia**

The threat which is faced by Colombian journalism is stigmatisation. Colombian journalists have always been subject to the gaze of the intolerant, of the paramilitaries, of the guerrillas, of the corrupt politician, and now, subject to the stigmatising suggestions of the very President of the Republic, Alvaro Uribe Velez, who has been signalling in a systematic way that I am an "ally of terrorism". It is the same with other journalists like Gonzalo Guillen, Daniel Coronell, and he has done the same with human rights defenders and even the magistrates of the Higher Courts.

### **The government claims that the murder of journalists in Colombia has been reduced...**

The Colombian government says with pride that under this government the number of journalists murdered has dropped, which is true, but not because Colombia is more democratic or because we are more acceptant of dissident thought, or of criticism, but simply this is occurring because journalists are self-censoring.

### **What is this self-censorship?**

It is manifested, for example, in Colombian journalists ceasing to cover the zones

of conflict in the country, the government having repeatedly suggested that journalists who cover these zones are “linked with terrorism”.

**Could the concentration of the media in few hands in Colombia not also be considered a form of censorship?**

Censorship is not in general direct, it is not something that is made public, it is not the shutdown of stations, of the media, but it is stigmatisation, the threats which arrive by mail, to your house, to your workers, or the public stigmatisation of the very President towards you, towards your work, but also the stigmatisation of the government towards certain subjects. For example, the behaviour of the President, insults towards certain journalists, mean that journalists almost don't ask him about his past, about his family helicopters [*a facility owned by the Medellin Cartel for the processing and trafficking of cocaine was raided in 1984, and a helicopter belonging to the father of Alvaro Uribe was discovered*], about the paramilitaries.

There are unmentionable subjects. Like for example, the President's dubious friendships. Some of the print media have been involved in conducting these types of investigations, which contrasts with the terrible passivity of the television [media] whose private channels present a tremendously reverential attitude to President Alvaro Uribe.

**On your programme, *Contravia*, you made an excellent documentary on one journalist's murder which awoke the conscience of the whole country. I am referring to the murder of Jaime Garzon. What do you think was the impact of this murder?**

I think the murder of Jaime Garzon was a message to critical journalism in Colombia, that we were not to interfere with certain power-bases in Colombian society, for me that was the message. From the moment of Jaime Garzon's murder, political criticism disappears from television, political satire disappears from television, and until today, ten years after his murder political satire does not exist on Colombian television.

**Speaking about censorship and self-censorship, just like the role of the print media ... What do you think of the today's news of the firing of Claudia Lopez from *El Tiempo* for her questioning of the bias of the paper?**

*El Tiempo's* attitude to Claudia Lopez is worrying. Firstly, her dismissal and

secondly, the fact that forum comments were blocked on their webpage. This is not democratic behaviour. But said attitude speaks to the turn which the paper is taking in the hands of Grupo Planeta and to the terrible influence of people like Jose Obdulio Gaviria, close confidants of the government, a government which does not tolerate the slightest criticism.

However, I think that at the heart of this incident is a debate for Colombian society, a debate about the quality of the information we are receiving on a daily basis. Colombian society, a country which is the second greatest human drama in the world, with “para-politics” [*the alliance of politicians from the ruling coalition with paramilitaries*], which is today discussing a questionable peace process with paramilitaries, which has gotten the freedom of hostages and discussions about peace, for this society; will it be healthy that there may be only one national newspaper? And that said paper is controlled by a group which doesn’t hide its intimate ties with the current government? And which now to cap it all gets rid of Claudia Lopez, one of their few dissident columnists. The heart of the debate, dear friends, is the quality of information that Colombians are receiving today, be it in press, radio or television. That is an urgent debate which Colombian society and its journalists must have, the strengthening or not of our democracy is to play for.

**What do you think about the legal pressures being applied to journalists involved in uncovering the links between the mafia and elements of the political and business classes? I am referring to the processes faced by Alfredo Molano, Daniel Coronell, Rodrigo Pardo, Maria Jimena Duzan etc.**

I say again, we are seeing a government and its circle which refuses to tolerate the slightest criticism. These are criticisms which have been made through detailed journalistic investigations, argued, which however, immediately are de-legitimised by members of the government. Remind yourself how the President [Uribe] called the director of the magazine *Semana*, Alejandro Santos, a liar when the irregularities in the administration of Jorge Noguera as director of the DAS [*the Colombian secret police*] are in the public domain as are his links with paramilitarism.

**The figure of Uribe in the press, however is ubiquitous. There has never been a more media-centric President than Uribe; the media are full of Uribe, morning, noon and night. What role, in your opinion, has the media played in this saturation?**

Let me see, there is also worthwhile journalistic work, as in the case of the magazine *Semana* and *El Espectador*. Through the magazine *Semana*, Colombia came to learn about the subject of para-politics and of the illegal phone-tapping performed by the DAS. The opinion pages in *El Espectador* present many different ways of analysing the reality of Colombia. However, I continue to be worried by the role played by the large TV stations, who do not raise the slightest criticism or questioning of President Alvaro Uribe, and at times it can appear as if they may be working as his press secretary. The complex Colombian reality demands that these channels generate spaces for debate, opinion, and that the return to the documentary and reportage as forms of executing the journalistic profession. Ignoring these journalistic genres in Colombia today, makes a mockery of the winds of blowing towards a strengthening of our democracy.

**And even still you keep *Contravia* going, in spite of the winds and swells, as the name of your show indicates; what are the difficulties you face?**

We have said that *Contravia* is returning to the air in the knowledge that there is no guarantee [of the quality of] our journalistic work. We were and we believe we will continue to be hunted by the DAS, by the President and we know that there are circles of people directed from the presidency, trying to mount a campaign to de-legitimise us, trying to de-legitimise our work.

**The very same President called it an "ally of terrorism" in public. What impact has this characterisation had in your professional and personal life?**

The Colombian people should know that a characterisation such as this, coming from the President and spread by TV during primetime, live and direct, and also, without questioning by the journalists who were there at the time, in Colombia is equivalent to a death threat. It has generated dozens of threats against our lives and against the journalistic project I direct. It has meant that time I should have been dedicating to journalistic investigation has been spent denouncing these acts which, I insist, put my life in danger. It has means that I spend an amount of time trying to block the propaganda campaign generated by said accusations. That is without going into the details of the damage it has caused my family, the psychological effects etc. What I can tell you is that payback is coming down the wire.

**What do you think about the DAS surveillance of you and of well-known human rights defenders, leaders of the political opposition and other people**

### **that make the government's life uncomfortable?**

It is incredible that a President who doesn't miss the slightest detail, who knows how many kilometres of paved roadway there are between Bogota and Medellin, who knows the names of local government figures in Puerto Rico, Caqueta, and who is known for keeping an iron grip on security matters, would not have known that his secret police, the DAS, was following us, listening to us and intimidating us over the last few years. I wasn't brought up a fool.

### **Why then continue in critical journalism in spite of the risks?**

For a number of reasons. Because it is difficult to travel through the country and see the conditions of thousands of peasants, arrive [*home*] and as a journalist to keep quiet, remain silent. Secondly, because this is not the country I want to leave to my children. I believe, for example considering these practices and these attacks against the '91 Constitution, that if we allow this to happen we will not be able to guarantee a good future for my children or for the next generations of Colombians. Those of us who lived through the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s, those of us who had our dreams killed with the murder of Luis Carlos Galan, Camilo Pizarro, Jaime Pardo Leal and Bernardo Jaramillo [*all presidential candidates from liberal and leftist parties murdered in this period*], and beforehand, with the murders of Andres Escobar and Jaime Garzon, we know, and so confirm the courts and the public prosecutor's office that the intellectual and material author [of these murders] was the monster called paramilitarism and that this same force, with said murders, took us back in future years. It inundated us in war and in polarisation, and for this reason my generation invented and realised for itself the dream of the Constitution of '91. the paramilitary project has won out in Colombia and now it is going to claim its trophy, to pick apart and attack the Constitution of '91, which is to condemn our country to another one hundred years of solitude and there are people like me - and there are many of us - who do not want to let that happen. For that reason we keep going against the grain with *Contravia*.

*This interview was conducted before the recent presidential election which saw Alvaro Uribe replaced with his former defence minister Juan Manuel Santos. Since the interview, Hollman Morris has been forced to leave Colombia for the United States to take up an academic post because of threats to his life. He was initially refused a visa by US officials who labelled him a "terrorist", following the example of the Colombian government.*