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Colombian “Peace”: Assassination attempt on peasant & community leader

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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Friday, May 4, saw the swelling of the growing list of victims in the popular movement in times of “peace”¹. In the outskirts of his home, in the El Triunfo neighborhood, in La Guadaluza, in the vicinity of Cartagena de Chairá, Jorge Vega Galvis received seven pistol shots from a group of hooded men, who left him there for dead. By a miracle, he survived to arrive at the

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¹ DB: The “Peace Process” was about reaching a deal between President Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC–EP) to bring an end to the Colombian conflict. Negotiations, mainly taking place in Havana, Cuba, began in September 2012. A final agreement to end the conflict was announced on August 24, 2016 but a referendum to ratify it was unsuccessful, with a slight majority voting against. Afterward, Congress ratified a revised deal agreed between the Colombian government and the FARC. Critics from the Left and from some human rights groups complain that the standing down of the guerrilla forces is allowing the State’s repressive forces and the paramilitary assassination squads to operate with impunity in areas where they would not have dared to previously (or at least would have been punished by the people’s forces).

local health centre, from which he was sent to hospital in Florencia, the area capital, because of the severity of his injuries. Today (May 8th), four days after this atrocious crime, he is still unconscious and battling for his life.

Jorge is originally from the administrative region of Cesar, from a small town near Poponte in Chiriguaná, where he was born into a humble peasant family, experiencing work from an early age and all kinds of deprivation. So that they would not be eaten alive by the mosquitoes and the midges in the bush, while he was working, he told me once that they had to smear their bodies with petrol and lemon juice, while they worked under the scorching sun. With social ideas instilled in him by his mother, he also knew the meaning of the word solidarity from an early age and while almost a child, he was already participating in the mobilizations for peasant rights.

With the infestation of the Cesar area by paramilitary gangs under the command of Jorge 40 of the AUC,² Jorge had to leave at the end of the '90s and head towards Caqueta lands. Little is left of his coastal accent now since he made his home in Cartagena de Chairá, where he makes a living, looking for what is to be had. He works as a taxi driver, sometimes as an electrician, and sometimes on farms. His home is in the midst of a humble shanty town settlement. But in different areas he has stood out as a social leader, promoting the Peasant Workers' Association of Caguán (ASTRACAMCAG, connected to Fensuagro), being President of the Cartagena de Chairá section; the El Triunfo and Villa Clar neighbourhood, community organizations, and also as a worker attached to the union of motorcycle taxi drivers of the CUT in Cartagena de Chairá. He has also held leadership positions in both the Patriotic March and the Alternative Democratic Pole.

² DB: Paramilitary drug-trafficking gang with close relationship to the Colombian Armed Forces (also supported by local big landowners) which attacked FARC and ELN and their civilian supporters. (For more about "Jorge 40" see link above about Rodrigo Tovar Pupo).

The attack against him is a blow at the heart of the popular processes in Chairá and Bajo Caguán. It is an attack that seeks to continue the disruption of popular processes brought about through the militarization of the region. It is part of the social-murder³ that is being carried out throughout the territory and which claims the lives of hundreds of social and agrarian leaders. We had already requested, in 2014, that the threats and harassment against Jorge be investigated⁴. Again in 2016, there were reports of threats received from paramilitaries.

The intimidation directed at Jorge by the troops has been almost continuous. In September 2017, we were suspiciously detained at a military checkpoint in Cartagena de Chairá, in the La Hacienda sector, while returning from visiting trials of peasants. Jorge asked them, “*Hey, are not we in a peace process? And you’re doing this ...*”, to which a soldier, who did not want to identify himself and who covered the insignia of his battalion with a cloth, answered simply, “*Of course, that’s why we can do this*”⁵. This attitude, Jorge explained to me, was normal. That night we had to sleep in the house of a peasant in the sector, because the army did not authorize our passage through until six in the morning of the following day, by which we were able to reach the crossing of the Caguán River and reach Cartagena. However, that night we alerted human rights organizations through Fensuagro because we had a well-founded fear that in the darkness of the night, there could be an “attack”.

This time, there was no intimidation: the threats have turned into terrible facts, before the unconcerned gaze, if not complicity, of the civil and military authorities.

It is not enough to ask that Jorge’s life be guaranteed by the authorities. We demand that they stop the bleeding of popular leaders that is happening, if not with their complicity, at

³ JA: anarkismo.net

⁴ JA: justiciaypazcolombia.com

⁵ JA: This incident had been described in a previous article anarkismo.net

least with their connivance and thanks to their calculated lack of action. In addition, it should be noted that with the so-brave militarization of Cartagena de Chairá, the activities of civic and popular organizations take place under constant fear. Guaranteeing the life of Jorge and the other social leaders in the Bajo y Medio Caguán, would lead to ensuring the full return to civil life in the municipality and that the army stops operating what is really a military occupation, in which they act with dictatorial powers.

Enough of this 'counterinsurgency' campaign, this militarization and let the parks of Cartagena be free of rifles. Those of us who have had the good fortune of knowing Jorge personally, know how much he has fought for peace with social justice; what a paradox it is now that during the "peace", they have pulled the trigger to silence him. Certainly, we know that this is not the peace for which Jorge risked his skin. For now Jorge, from your friends and comrades, we send you a big hug, all our energy and we assure you that we will not leave you alone for a second. We send you strength to keep fighting, mate. Do not leave us.

Postscript by D. Breatnach: My information is that Jorge Vega Galvis survived the attack and continues to recover. We wish him a speedy recovery and send our solidarity greetings.