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In Colombia, Are They 'Safe Havens' Or FARC Havens?

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When Colombian President Alvaro Uribe dared to say, in a September speech, that some "human rights" groups in this country are actually fronts for terrorists, local and international leftists took great umbrage.

Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd, who has a well-known soft spot for the Latin left, delivered a pious lecture: "It's imperative that the administration continue to impress on [Mr. Uribe] the importance of democratic values, such as the respect for human rights and free speech."

Let's hope Mr. Dodd isn't dieting, because credible testimony that has been made available to me and will likely be investigated by government authorities suggests that he may soon have to eat his words. Mr. Uribe merely verbalized something that has become increasingly evident, but until now few politicians have had the courage to address.

The testimony I refer to has not been confirmed by independent sources but sounds plausible based on my knowledge of the region and the political biases of certain NGOs. It comes from northern Colombia, where rebels depend on access to critical land and water routes to run drugs and arms in and out of the country. The individuals who have come forward claim that NGO "peace communities" plotted along these supply lines and granted autonomy from the Colombian state, have become safe havens for these narcotrafficking guerrillas. The most immediate victims of this development are among Colombia's most vulnerable populations.

The roots of the violence suffered by the largely Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples in these regions -- Choco and Uraba -- date back to the early 1960s, when communist insurgents and their political branches began working to control the territory. Fast forward to the mid-1990s and what you found was a well-established revolutionary network, with rebels going about in military uniforms with AK-47s, prohibiting peasants from free movement in and out of their communities and blatantly stealing farm animals and produce.

The main rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), became active in the cocaine business, trading product for weapons and munitions across the Panamanian border. When paramilitary fighters moved into the region to challenge the FARC, terrified campesinos ran for their lives.

Beginning in 1997, the Catholic Church diocese of Apartado proposed the creation of neutral zones that would allow the displaced population to return to their lands without fear of paramilitaries or guerrillas. Administration of this proposal, which pledged the full disarmament of all actors within the "peace community" of San Jose de Apartado, was turned over primarily to Inter-congregational Justicia y Paz, a

Colombian NGO. Justicia has had backing from Amnesty International and the Peace Brigades International.

In 2000, a similar community was established on the other side of the Atrato River in the Cacarica River basin. Of the 700 families displaced from Cacarica originally only 200 agreed to return and live under the NGO administration.

It seemed a well-intentioned idea, but the upshot appears to have been the creation of rebel safe havens. Judging from the testimony of locals, they were stripped of any voice in governance. Community "leaders" who were trained by the FARC took over. These leaders, the testimony says, pump out continual anti-government propaganda and obstruct the state in its effort to meet its responsibilities. Accredited teachers from outside are not permitted. Instead, high-school students are the preferred "educators." A key objective is to drum up FARC recruits.

It is further alleged that within these sealed communities FARC members are allowed to sleep, eat, transit, stock arms and drugs and hide from authorities. They are said to take part in governance councils. There is testimony that opponents of community politics have "disappeared." Government authorities are blocked from investigating murders and disappearances.

Those in control, it is alleged, siphon off international and domestic aid meant for the population, sell supplies to cocaine labs and buy up peasant lands. Agricultural and housing projects have failed due to the lack of cooperation with outsiders, the lack of qualified labor, and poor planning.

The people lived "10 times" better before the displacement, claims one local. "There was no aid but the people worked and earned a livelihood." Now, "it's inhumane." Many residents of the tiny community live in small homes made of leaves and are malnourished. Perhaps most egregious is the use of fear to keep the population where it is, so that it can serve as a human shield against possible military challenges by the state or paramilitary groups.

Justicia y Paz responded to some of these allegations in a open letter to the international human rights community on Sept. 9. It claimed, among other things, that the government had failed to deliver promised aid and that the group's critics "interpret any contact with insurgents, in defense of the same community, as if it is coordinated activity with them."

When these allegations become public, as seems likely, the accusers will be denounced as paramilitary actors telling lies. Yet unless Justicia y Paz agrees to some minimum level of accountability, it will be difficult to ignore the cries of misery contained in the testimony. Such abuses are in fact familiar, mirroring what the guerrillas did in southern Colombia when former President Andres Pastrana gave them autonomy during his failed "peace" talks. The "clearing," as it was known, became a place to amass weapons, catch up on rest and relaxation, "recruit" boys to fight, hide kidnap victims and otherwise prepare terror.

Two keys to winning a guerrilla war are denying the enemy safe haven and keeping the locals on your side. If the testimony is valid, and I think it is, the "peace communities" in northern Colombia violate both of these rules, to say nothing of the human suffering imposed on a defenseless people.