

Sharing eye-witness accounts of **Colombia** across Canada

PBI-Canada has recently been involved in two Colombia-related speaking tours, one by Erika Zárate, a return volunteer from the PBI Colombia Project and the other by a well-known Colombian human rights lawyer.

In May of this year, PBI-Canada organized an eastern Canada speaking tour for Erika, who was a member of the PBI team in Urabá, Colombia from April 2004 to April 2005. Erika provided protective accompaniment to threatened human rights defenders including peace community leaders, human rights lawyers and other

human rights defenders working in the Urabá region. During the speaking tour, she spoke at fourteen public forums in ten cities across four provinces, including Ontario, Québec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In addition to the public forums, Erika also participated in eleven civil society meetings.

Overall, the tour was a great success. Many people and groups came forward to express interest in lending support to the political work of PBI – both institutionally and financially. This included interest in support for future volunteers in the field, interest in and ideas about how to support the work of PBI-Canada and for PBI project work in general. Much was learned about how best to continue to bring home to Canada the news of international efforts toward peace. This is a critical step in building the political and financial support required to sustain and expand the impact of PBI in partner countries worldwide.

The second speaking tour in November was organized in collaboration with Lawyers Without Borders (ASF) and the Colombian Action Solidarity Alliance (CASA). ASF invited internationally-renowned Colombian human rights lawyer Reinaldo Villalba Vargas, who practices

with CAJAR (Jose Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective) to tour across eastern Canada.

As a member of CAJAR, Dr. Villalba is regularly accompanied by PBI volunteers in Bogotá. He directs the CAJAR Penal Law department in defence of persecuted leaders and members of labour unions, student unions and non-violent resistance communities in Colombia. He has also prosecuted in such high-profile cases as the forced disappearances during the M-19 takeover of the Palace of Justice in 1985, the massacre of 20 indigenous people from the Nasa first nation in 1991, and the assassination of the vice president of the Central Union of Workers (CUT), Jorge Ortega Garcia in 1998.

Dr. Villalba shared his perspectives about the recent paramilitary demobilization process in Colombia and the high level of impunity associated with this demobilization. He spoke with law students and professors at the University of Toronto and York University and also met with several solidarity, social justice and human rights organizations in Toronto including Amnesty International Colombia-CREDHOS working group, KAIROS, Canadian Auto Workers, and ACT for the Earth.



Erika Zarate (former Canadian volunteer with the Colombia Project), Reinaldo Villalba Vargas (Colombian human rights lawyer) and Karine Ruel (Lawyers Without Borders-ASF) at a meeting in the PBI-Canada office.