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Colombia is “School of Peacebuilding,” Catholic Church leaders and specialists told at international gathering in Bogota

“Colombia is best known for its conflicts, but for the Church, it is a school of peacebuilding,” according to **Msgr. Hector Fabio Henao**, the keynote speaker at the Fourth International Catholic Peacebuilding Network conference in Bogota, Colombia, June 24-29.

“We have learned that the Church must help Colombians understand that there are no easy, short-term solutions to the conflict, that reconciliation cannot wait until the fighting stops, and that there is much light and reason for hope amidst the darkness and despair of conflict,” he added. Msgr. Henao is director of the Secretariado Nacional de Pastoral Social/Caritas Colombiana of the Colombian Bishops' Conference, the host and co-sponsor of the conference.

The theme of this year's conference was **Creating a Climate of Reconciliation: Opening Space for Truth, Justice and Reparation in Colombia**. 175 participants from Colombia, including two dozen Colombian bishops, and 54 church leaders and specialists in peacebuilding from 21 other countries attended the week-long event.

The conference opened participants' eyes to the Church's peacebuilding role around the world, said **Archbishop Ruben Salazar Gomez**, president of Secretariado Nacional de Pastoral Social/Caritas Colombiana.

“After so many years of conflict, it is easy to lose hope,” he said. “This week’s events have strengthened our spirit, for we do not feel alone.”

The conference sought to highlight the mostly untold story of the Catholic Church’s role in promoting peace in Colombia, said **Gerard Powers** of the Joan B. Kroc Institute at the University of Notre Dame who chairs the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

“By bringing together scholars, Church leaders, and peace practitioners from countries torn by conflict, we can discern ‘best practices’ in peacebuilding and explore ways to be in solidarity with the Church in Colombia,” he said.

Martha Ines Romero of Catholic Relief Services in Colombia said that peace in Colombia clearly requires the work of many people. “This is not only an issue for parties who are fighting, but for Colombian society as a whole – the Catholic Church, other churches, civil society organizations, business organizations, and local government,” she said. “Colombian participants and those communities visited by the international delegation now feel they are supported by many, many people who are walking with us on our path of peace from the Philippines, Cameroon, Myanmar, South Africa, the United States, México, Perú, Bolivia, Ecuador, Haití and elsewhere.”

The conference covered a range of issues, from the Church’s role in the peace process and the need for justice and reparations for victims to civil society’s efforts to create a culture of reconciliation. Participants spent the first two days of the conference visiting peacebuilding sites in Bogota and Medellin, acquiring a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of Colombia’s long conflict, and experiencing first-hand the struggles and successes of peacebuilders in Colombia.

The final day of the conference included meetings with 20 Colombian bishops who play key roles in peacebuilding and a meeting of civil society leaders from around Colombia.

In addition to SNPS/Caritas Colombiana and the CPN, the conference was co-sponsored by Catholic Relief Services; Notre Dame’s Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and Kellogg Institute for International Studies; and the Church in Latin America Program of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Boston College’s

Center for Human Rights and International Justice, Notre Dame's Center for Civil and Human Rights and the United Nations Development Program also provided support for the conference.

The Catholic Peacebuilding Network is a voluntary network of practitioners, academics, clergy and laity that seeks to enhance the study and practice of peacebuilding, especially at the local level. In addition to its annual conference, which will be held at the University of Notre Dame, April 13-15, 2008, the CPN is sponsoring a major research project on the theology, ethics and practice of Catholic peacebuilding and assists with peacebuilding training for Catholic leaders.

The CPN was formed in 2004 by Notre Dame's Kroc Institute and Catholic Relief Services, with the active involvement of the Office of International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Maryknoll, the Center for International Social Development at the Catholic University of America, the Sant'Egidio Community in the United States, Pax Christi International, and Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

The conference program, list of participants, papers presented at the conference, and video of the conference can be found on the CPN website: <http://cpn.nd.edu>

Following are additional reflections from some CPN conference participants:

Lisa Cahill

Boston College Theology Department

Reflecting on the work being done by peacebuilders in Colombia, the most important need is to find ways to restore the humanity of the victims of this conflict.

John Paul Lederach

Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies

University of Notre Dame

What is most striking in Colombia is the range and variety of the Church's peacebuilding efforts. The Church is working at all levels and across the sharp divisions of society. The challenge is to figure out how better to bring together these efforts in order to deepen the impact of the Church's impressive work for peace.

Archbishop Antonio Ledesma, SJ

Archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro and Vice President,

Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

The week-long conference of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network in Bogota has been an extraordinary learning experience for me. The "pedagogical" methods used included background reading material, site visits, presentations by expert resource persons, small group discussions, and interactions with numerous Colombian bishops.

I began to get a more realistic picture of the complex war-and-peace situation in Colombia as well as the varied and valiant responses of Church communities and leaders at the local and national levels.

The international participants, particularly from Asia and Africa, we were also invited to share our own experiences in peacebuilding and approaches towards reconciliation. In this way, Catholic peacebuilders are starting to join hands in solidarity with the victims of violence in various parts of the world today.

Archbishop John Onaiyekan

Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria

Colombia shows what a united Church can do with commitment and love. A difficult challenge is to find a way to reconcile justice and forgiveness.

Bishop Thomas Wenski

Diocese of Orlando

Chairman, Committee on International Policy, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Coming from many parts of the world, participants in this week's CPN conference put flesh on the universal desire for peace. In the presence of so much conflict, the task of building a lasting peace cannot falter. A solidarity of affection must become a solidarity of effective action.

Claudette Werleigh

Secretary-General-Elect, Pax Christi, International

We feel very privileged to have been able to participate in the 4th International Conference of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network in Colombia. Time has been short. We cannot pretend to have fully grasped all the multiple aspects and causes of the conflict. We are leaving better aware of the complexity of the situation.

The organizers have made it possible for us to travel to meet and hear hundreds of people. We have witnessed, first hand, how many Colombians -- men and women, nuns, priests, bishops and lay people – are trying in a diversity of ways to alleviate pain and misery, create space for people together, share ideas, work and live as brothers and sisters in Christ.

This week's experience has strengthened our respect and our deep solidarity with the Catholic Church in its search for truth, justice, reconciliation and peace.