

GREEN LETTER

No. 80 from Colombia,
February 11th, 2006
Compiled and edited by Jenny James

Correspondence welcome: atlantiscol@hotmail.com

A week ago, an email arrived inviting Anne Barr, as an Irish person, to a "welcome party" for the incoming Irish Ambassador. Anne had no interest in going, but I pushed her to, saying, "It might be politically interesting." It was. Here is her account:

A Verbal Punch-up with the US Ambassador

.....I got out my least scruffy clothes and went. As soon as I got to the entrance I was put off once again by the arrival of enormous vehicles with smoked glass windows, accompanied by cavalcades of policemen on motorbikes. I walked past the place trying to think of an excuse I could give Jenny when I got home as to why I didn't go in. I couldn't think of a good one so I turned back and entered into this 19th century-style gentlemen's club. It was a small gathering of men in posh suits and a few women and I hadn't a clue what to do, but eventually got up the courage to go and shake hands and introduce myself. The Irish ambassador is very nice and so were the well rounded priests from the Papal Anuncio, even when I told them I was an atheist and so were several other Irish people who work in chemical, logging, and petrol companies, even when I told them I am an ecologist...

I had gone with the plan to talk to everyone about the profound and hateful cynicism of the Colombian so-called "Law of Justice and Peace" that allows the most cruel paramilitary serial murderers to get off scot-free and carry on with their dirty dealings, massacres and mass displacements of campesinos and indians so they can grow coca leaf and palm oil on stolen land and so they can "secure" areas where there is petrol to be exploited and all under the thin disguise of a "Peace Process". And once I saw that William Woods, the US ambassador to Colombia, was there too I got over my nerves and began to "circulate" in proper cocktail party style.

I started with the Irish ambassador, saying I was sorry to have to talk seriously at this social occasion but why are the Irish government supporting this criminal "law" and if they continue to insist on supporting it, then they must push for it to be changed so that it leads to something truly resembling Justice or Peace. He was a very good diplomat because he managed to convince me of his good

intentions, saying that he had just told Colombian President Uribe that the European Community would not be shy about criticising the "peace process". He also let me know " diplomatically of course - that he does not like Uribe, who, he says, is very hard to talk to as he has very fixed opinions and ideas and has polarized the country. We talked for a long time and I was surprised at his accessibility and willingness to communicate.

Then the US ambassador came to speak to him, so I introduced myself and said I was sorry etc. but what are they going to do to give this "Justice and Peace" law real teeth? He started off being quite condescendingly nice, saying he was glad that I was asking this because they have pushed a lot to have the time allowed for the State Attorney to investigate the paramilitary chiefs extended from a laughable 6 weeks to an only slightly less ridiculous 6 months. I said, "You know that is too short a time as the legal authorities are so slow here." Then he did start to get annoyed. I said there is an enormous problem in the reinsertion programmes, one of which is run by the US Embassy, in that the re-inserted paramilitaries and guerrillas are absorbed straight back into the war as army informers. He got very annoyed and aggressive at this point and said, "give me names and brigades." I said OK I would, but that these men are not officially on the army payroll though they are supported and armed by the army. "What are we talking about here then?" he said very loudly and angrily, trying to put me down, "Are they or are they not in the army?" I said it did not matter, they were being kept in the war and that is not a way to bring peace, and anyway they often use their position as informers to settle old accounts that have nothing to do with the war. And the most serious criticism is that to be accepted into reinsertion programmes, they have to offer some kind of information against the guerrilla so if they don't have it, they make it up and get innocents killed.

He then got even more annoyed and said that these informers are our only way to get at the "bad guys". I was stunned and asked: "What is this talk of bad guys? so all the guerrilla are bad guys and the paramilitaries are the good guys?!" He interrupted me to tell me of guerrilla informers who'd helped capture Simon Trinidad, one of the best political FARC leaders, now in a US prison. I said he must know that all informers are highly

unreliable, like the pathetic man they put on the witness stand against the 3 Irishmen who couldn't even get his dates straight and had obviously never been in the guerrilla. I told him I was fairly sure that he knew a woman friend of mine whose innocent 15-year-old daughter has recently been killed by the army when they were led by an ex-guerrilla informer to a farmhouse, where there were 4 women and 2 men asleep after a Xmas party. I said this woman is Brigida Gonzalez of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado. I thought he might know her as the leaders of San Jose have had many interviews with the Human Rights section of the US Embassy and her daughter was not a guerrilla nor were the other 3 young women who were killed along with her. He then had another frothing fit about San Jose saying that he knows "A Lot" about them and "they are not what they seem." This kind of statement in Colombia and from a man in his position, is a death sentence. I said he must know that there is no black or white in Colombia, especially in the countryside where nearly every family has members in all the armed groups. He was obviously highly uncomfortable with any kind of concept that is more complicated than the US cowboys-and-Indians view of the world, so he challenged me once again to get him "names and addresses" and then said he had to go. I was left feeling very surprised at his uncouthness and lack of intelligent diplomacy and at how unprepared and unable he was to answer any kind of criticism. The Irish Ambassador and I looked at each other in shared dismay and disapproval.

During this interchange the other more polite and civilized people in the room kept looking at us with surprise and interest and one man, the smooth Colombian director of Carton Colombia, a logging and paper-making company that is a subsidiary of Irish millionaire Michael Smurfit's empire, came over to me and gave me a warm hug and asked, "Was I OK?" - a gesture of solidarity from a very unexpected quarter. And then there was more human contact from the British Consul who, when I said how awful the "Justice and Peace" law was, rolled his eyes to heaven in agreement but, given the awful government he represents, was unable to make any comment.

I was glad to get back on a crowded bus that took me back to this little housing estate, the kind of rarefied atmosphere of the Ambassadors' tea-party gives one a very false impression of what the world is really about....

=====

PRAYING FOR ELECTORAL GUIDANCE " A Shop Conversation, reported by Anne

I went into a tiny local shop last Sunday morning and heard a little old lady say to the shopkeeper that she was very confused about the so-called Justice and Peace law. She was referring to the headlines in the Sunday paper which said that most of the paramilitaries, who are in jail for obscenely awful massacres and robberies of whole areas of land from their poor and rightful owners, are about to be set free. I joined in by saying that yes the situation is very terrible indeed. She said that all these paramilitaries are being recruited by the army and the police and that ordinary people like us will be at the receiving end of their violence in the future and that she was very worried about the young lads who have to serve their time in the military as they'll be exposed to the influence of these people too. The shopkeeper and I were nodding in agreement. Then the old lady said she prayed at mass for guidance as to who to vote for!....I said what we had to do was to make sure that no-one we know votes for President Uribe and they both heartily agreed.

This conversation was unusual, for up till now ordinary people on the street have been scared to openly criticise the President, but it seems this is changing....

A somewhat heartening Message from Marulanda, head of the FARC (reported by Anne)

A man who has just come out of jail where he spent 9 years for "rebellion" and attempted kidnap as part of the FARC guerrilla force told me the following when I complained to him about the serious abuse of power going on within many FARC fronts, abuse which resulted in the deaths of our own two boys and the loss of two farms. He said that Marulanda, the legendary and now very old founder and figure-head of the FARC, had recently sent out a very critical communique about the many fronts whose members have turned into common criminals.

The FARC man reporting this to me agreed (as do so most people within areas of FARC influence) that the militia, who are armed civilians (usually young men) acting as the eyes and ears of the guerrilla in the towns and villages, cause big problems because they are ill-trained and have far too much power. They are supposed to act as links between the guerrilla and civilians, but often use this power very badly, bad-rapping to their guerrilla commanders about people they don't like, thus often condemning innocent people to death or displacement, as we know to our cost.

None of this is news, peasants caught between the sadism of the FARC militia and that of the army and

paramilitaries have known and suffered it for decades.... but the fact that the revered figurehead of the FARC should now be sending out a strong message, however belatedly, on this horrible situation in the Colombian countryside, might possibly signal some kind of hope for change.

=====

Some Politically Incorrect Comments from Anne re Chomsky and Colombia

Hello Chris,

Jenny showed me the article you sent by Chomsky on Colombia and it reminded me of a meeting I had with ACIN, the Indian organisation that represents most of the Paez Indians in Cauca.

A few months ago I was in the studio of their radio station with a small group of their leaders.... I asked about their relationship to the guerrilla and they immediately turned their mikes off. I won't go into the details of what they said here, but let me tell you that Chomsky's derogatory version of the FARC is a long way from what they told me, he commits the (understandable) error that most foreign "Colombian-ologists" commit, over-simplifying this conundrum of a country.

It can never be denied that territories such as the Paez Indians have in Cauca, where there is a certain amount of room for them to be themselves, to reclaim their land and culture, is thanks to the existence of the guerrilla groups. They themselves most certainly do not deny this. Not even the more enlightened elements of the right-wing in Colombia deny this. I once stayed with a rich conservative in Cucuta near the border with Venezuela. This was in pre-Chavez times when the Venezuelan cops were heavy and horrible. This right-wing man said: "the Colombian cops are just as bad, but thankfully the guerrilla keep them on the run." There are dozens of anecdotes like this " as well as thousands of bitter left wingers who are vehemently anti FARC because they've seen and suffered too many tragedies like ours.

I can't blame Chomsky for his no doubt well-meaning over-simplification of this unbelievably complicated country. But what I can and do blame him for is that I just can't help yawning every-time I feel obliged (because he's so famous and politically correct) to quickly scan something he's written. He's grey and colourless and even manages to make Colombia seem so. Nobody has the right to be that boring!

The rest of this Green Letter is devoted to the subject of "Riches" and "Poverty".....

Words of Wisdom from Seneca (died 65 A.D.)

"How long shall we weary heaven with petitions for superfluous luxuries, as though we had not at hand the wherewithal to feed ourselves? How long shall we fill our plains with huge cities? How long shall the people slave for us unnecessarily? How long shall countless ships from every sea bring us promises for the consumption of a single mouth?" (Quoted in "New Internationalist")

CREATED POVERTY

(Translation of excerpts from the lead article of a small Colombian environmental newsheet, "El Agrion", Sept. 2005 by Jaime Bedoya Martinez of Manizales.

"We have lost important basic elements of our culture which at least enabled us to live self-sufficiently, living art forms, that showed wise discipline and intelligence, including saving produce, avoiding all waste, and putting no value upon social climbing, showing off, trying to be like the rest, or to be better than the neighbours.

"Now we have lost our ancestral social customs which enabled us to subsist with dignity, without the poverty which is manifest today amongst people who could actually be immensely rich with the incomes they earn if they did not suffer from the unhealthy desire to put on a front, to aspire to live like rich people in order to impress; instead, they get into debt and mortgage themselves off for life, causing themselves suffering rather than economize, save and live simply.

"Less than 80 years ago, the "poor" lived better than many apparently "rich" people do today, their homes were well-provided and there was no sign of the social, cultural and economic misery which nowadays is so common.... Practically all of us today receive an elitist education and are trained to try to live on the level of Americans or Europeans... we are victims of a stereotyped culture living beyond the reality of our countries where elitist employment exists only in the imagination of the industrialized universities...now we want only to imitate, to be social climbers and pretenders....

"Less than 80 years ago, we lived very well indeed, with much less than half the things we have today, which are not at all necessary. If we did without many of these "created necessities", we could live even better than the

many rich people who live trying to impress their neighbours. We don't need to indulge in the super luxury of having a car, of being a compulsive consumer, of trying to show off by owning a big house or the latest technological invention or wearing the last word in fashion, buying clothes of special brands created specially by the multinationals to exploit alienated consumers....

"Another huge mistake we make is to try and maintain our children like rich kids, ignoring the wise advice of Pythagoras who said, "Raise your child as a child of the poor and you will make him rich, bring him up like a rich man and you will impoverish him." Today parents, even when it is beyond their means, want all their children to become doctors instead of responsible citizens in accordance with the realities of the country and the work available.

"Today no mother wants to dress her baby in homemade booties: instead before he is even able to stand up, she buys him expensive shoes and overdresses him with clothes just for the neighbours to admire, garments that have no use but are pure luxury, thus stretching the home economy, causing a tightening of the belt, and impoverishing the home. We are poor because of the mania of trying to live like the rich, trying to show off and ending up looking ridiculous.

"We make all kinds of sacrifices to give our children an elitist university education and for what? - so that when they graduate, they can wander around the streets doing nothing, out of work, deteriorating as people .. would it not be better to guide them towards the kind of work which is plentiful so that they can learn to earn their living? There is a saturation in practically all the university professions; everywhere we see doctors, lawyers, agronomists, veterinary surgeons, engineers, business administrators in the streets, doing other jobs for which they do not need that kind of education; what they need is practical training which can only be gained in the real world. We have so many graduates, post-graduates, diplomas, but we don't have usefully trained enterprising people who are so needed to lift us out of our "under-development".

"We Colombians, and Latin-Americans in general, are potentially rich, but we live in shameful poverty, besieged by notions of "what the neighbours will think", and stunted and bewitched by city life which turns us into slaves.... Everyone has to invent their own work like we did in the past, to survive with dignity and not turn into layabouts: that way we will find real freedom and true riches. Don't let us close the doors on the infinite possibilities that exist if we allow our own creativity to function fully. Let us bury these "vertical", monetary economies and seek true civilization .."

The poor rich of Bogota by Anne Barr

Thanks to my odd profession of doing astrological charts for all different classes of people in Bogota I have seen first-hand how rich does not equal happy. Indeed where I've met the strangest and most screwed up people has been in the upper echelons of this class-ridden city. I can definitely say now that being rich is bad for your health. It means:

- That you don't learn how to cook or clean, both of which are basic, important activities and meditative exercises. I recently heard an 18 year-old girl say proudly she had never washed a dish in her life.....and she wasn't even particularly rich.

- That you get your exercise by going to a gym to waste your energy on stupid and unproductive exercises and then take the car to work instead of walking or going by bike.

- That you go to expensive supermarkets to buy expensive packets of refined and unhealthy food.

- That the people who "serve" you " the porter, the watchman, the maid etc. are not human beings to you. I've seen so, so many left-wing and "progressive" people treat their domestic help like slaves, it's a sickness here (and has been the subject of many a domestic row with friends).

- That you live in neighbourhoods where the only beings on the streets are the security personnel. You never get to know your neighbours and you tend to live in small and expensive luxurious prisons...

..... Whereas if you're poor, in spite of having to work too much to make too little money and having to endure snooty employers, you probably live in a more lively and spacious area, with cheaper, healthier food and a much better social life and you probably have kids that know enough about life to defend themselves. Unfortunately, your ambition is probably to make enough money to be able to live like your rich employers....

"Electricity is the handmaiden of modern technology, whose inexorable advance is really terrifying. Once you have the use of electricity you cannot get along without it. The memory of happy, less frenetic days B.E. is lost... The proliferation of electrically-operated gadgets shows no sign of abating. Until it does, there is not much sense

in getting upset about the deterioration of our environment. The demand for electric power is the devil in the machine. The depletion of our natural resources and the fouling of our environment spring from this most important single source."

(From: "This Country Life" by Samuel Ogden, quoted in "Organic Gardening Magazine", USA)

The Poverty of Riches

From an article in The New Internationalist (Oct. 2005) on the state of American society as revealed by Hurricane Katrina, by Jeremy Seabrook...

"...The stranded survivors of New Orleans were devoid of basic skills for survival, since survival in America depends totally upon money. Even the poorest people of Bangladesh, Niger, Brazil or India are not poor in the same way ... The poor of the US ...are just as dependent upon money as the rich are, only they do not have the wherewithal to participate in a society constructed on the assumption that all human needs, wants and comforts must be bought in from the market. Nothing is grown, made, invented or created by the people for themselves and for others...

"In the developing world, poor people have learned to cope with what is lacking in their lives... This is why the urban poor in Dhaka, Mumbai, Nairobi and Lagos still build their own shelters, create their own livelihoods, seek out their own fuel and grow food on any small parcel of land they can find.... The instinctive response of the poor in the "underdeveloped" world is to succour those weaker than themselves, to share with them such meagre resources as they possess, to show a fundamental solidarity....

"Some commentators in America described scenes in New Orleans as "reminiscent of the Third World." They could not have been more wrong.these are scenes which occur only in the lands of privilege. This is what the poor of India and all the other hopeful countries of the world have been taught to envy and to long for. This is the supreme achievement of the richest societies the world has ever known; and it is the model, not merely preached, but actually imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the governments of the G8. That they are in no position to tell anyone else what to do is the enduring lesson from the disaster which has befallen, not merely Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, but American society itself, as it has demonstrated to the world its indifference towards those for whom the

designation "loser," "no-hoper", "failure" is applied as a stigma of moral as well as material incapacity.

"It has long been clear that the West could easily provide a comfortable sufficiency for all the people of its own societies, if it chose to do so. It does not, for the simple reason that the fate of the poor must be maintained, as a warning and example to all who might otherwise be tempted to drop out, to relax their vigilance, to withdraw from the competitive ethos that drives people on to accumulate .."

"That happiness is to be attained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to mankind, but is preached incessantly by every American television set." - Robert Bellah (1975)

A MESSAGE FROM IRELAND....

Our friend Chris Murray of Waterford, Ireland, who visited us in Colombia recently, sends this report from his home town:

"It has just been announced on our local news that a massive development here, including a giant car park for 800 cars, has been turned down by the Council, partly thanks to a motley crew activist coalition. That's the second win against the system here in a year - we got a motorway rerouted earlier. They're small wins, probably temporary, and only make The Monster attack somewhere else instead, but they still matter.

Here's what I wrote as my contribution to the campaign:

RE: Planned New Monstrosities in New St/Stephen St. area

Dear Waterford Corporation,

I was born and reared in Waterford City and I oppose the latest proposed abominations.....We don't need any more shopping centres. We're swamped with shops and shopping centres. No-one in Ireland will even notice, never mind starve, if we don't get yet another gargantuan, obscene cathedral to greed, boredom and excess.

I was in a beautiful remote South American valley for a month last year. It was embarrassing and sickening to come back from a place where the nearest shop was a small cabin 10 miles away along a pot-holed mountain road to a place full of shopping centres full of 50 foot shelves full of chocolate. And now we need to build more????!!!!

The richest people in that valley were poorer than the

poorest people in Ireland, yet people smiled and laughed and chatted more than people do here. Why? Maybe because they still have some kind of community, with extended family, friends and neighbours all around. Maybe because their communities are a bit like how Irish communities used to be, and haven't yet been smashed by rich cartels and their bureaucratic patsies.

Who the hell are KRM Construction Partnership anyway? Their plan is just another scam to churn out yet more cash for rich money-addicts who are already stuffed to the gills with it. If this devouring lunacy is the only way to sustain an economy, then we need to change the whole system. Fast.

Bad enough that this obsession with building is devastating the countryside and cities, but it's not even justified on narrow economic grounds. The so-called Celtic Tiger was built on US investment, mainly in IT and chemicals. That investment is flooding out towards Eastern Europe and the Far East, so the gombeen-men are keeping the "Tiger" artificially alive by frantically pumping money into the building industry, irrespective of need, or economic sense, or good planning, or the environment, or community, or heritage, or concern for what happens when the bubble bursts.

I worked in the Roads Department of Dublin Corporation 30 years ago and reluctantly half-swallowed the propaganda of the planners, developers and engineers that Dublin would choke with traffic unless they got their way. They were EXPERTS after all, and I was just a kid. Well, they smashed and bashed their way left and right through peoples' homes, they bulldozed entire communities, chanting their ridiculous mantras about the great gods "Growth" and "Infrastructure" and "Development" and "Progress", sneering at those "serial objectors" and "cranks" who pointed out that roads attract cars like shit attracts flies. "Dublin will DIE without loads of new roads!" they shouted hysterically. The irrational progress-addicts got their way and guess what? Dublin's traffic is still a nightmare.

When I came back to Waterford, it seemed that the city had learned from Dublin. Now it's open season, like some kind of competition as to who can build the worst monstrosity the quickest (and demolish it and build an even bigger monstrosity)... everything is measured in money, and now we all worship the One True God, Money

Ould Ireland Has Died

(song written by Anne which will appear on Katie's new CD in English)

The springs that filled the holy wells are choked with plastic now
The sacred springs that fed this lovely land
And there're dark clouds a-brewin' and trouble's near at hand.

The Salmon that leapt the weirs and brought their wisdom to these shores
They don't came back here any more
But ah sure never mind, there's plenty of money and cars and trash galore.

The Cailleach Bearach left in time, she jumped into the sea
She saw the writing on the wall
She knew that soon there'd be nothing wild or green left at all

There's a new myth now, running through this land
Promising ends of rainbows and pots of gold
But the Celtic Tigers have eaten up our hearts and left us cold
Oh where are the heroes and giant men of old?

Old Ireland of the thousand welcomes took all strangers in
But now cead mile failte are only for those
Who can pay at the door with a couple of cead mile euros.

So don't come back like Oisín seeking the old times
They've gone forever, sunk beneath the tide
Of New Europe's rules and poor ould Ireland has died.

.....

"The ecologically destructive path we are on is as if all of humanity is in a giant car heading towards a brick wall at 100 miles an hour... There are a few screaming to put on the brakes and turn the wheel, but they are locked in the trunk." Dr. David Suzuki, quoted in Organic Gardening magazine, USA, May/June 1999

An Anonymous Rhyme from Long Ago

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose...

The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who take the things that are yours and mine.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
And geese will still a common lack
Till they rise up and steal it back!"

Relax, we're in Safe Hands...

"I'm driven with a mission from God.
God would tell me, "George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan." And I did.
And then God would tell me, "George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq..." And I did.

And now again I feel God's words coming to me: "Go get the Palestinians their State and get the Israelis their security ... and by God, I'm gonna do it."

GB to Mr. Shaath, Palestinian information minister, reported in the Irish Examiner)

....Or are we?

"Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]?... The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable, and we should face up to that. I've always thought under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low (in pollutants) compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. The concern over an agent that causes a one-in-a-million change in the odds of prostate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostate cancer than in a country where under-five mortality is 200 per thousand." Memo by Lawrence Summers, World Bank chief economist (1991)

"It isn't pollution that's harming our environment, it's the impurities in our air and water that are doing it." G. W. You-Know-Who

P.S.

"We have become addicted to our way of life and to our way of thinking. We must drive our cars, use our clothes dryers, smoke our cigarettes, drink our alcohol, earn a profit, look good, behave in a socially acceptable fashion, and never speak out of turn or speak the truth, for fear of rejection.

"The problem with addicted people, communities, corporations, or countries is that they tend to lie, cheat, steal to get their 'fix'. Corporations are addicted to profit and governments to power, and as Henry Kissinger once said, 'Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac...' Helen Caldicott (1992)