

Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights Plenary
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I am always honored to address the VPs Plenary but I am especially excited to do so today in my home town when Colombia is close to ending a 60-year war. I genuinely believe that over the past 15 years the Voluntary Principles has made a difference in many rural areas in Colombia. I have no doubt the initiative can continue to play an extremely important role in the peacebuilding efforts ahead.

Events that occurred in Colombia in the late 1990s helped trigger the VPs. In 1997, headlines in US and UK newspapers claimed BP had passed information of protestors to our intelligence agency and armed forces at a time when links between to the so called paramilitary and security forces were beginning forge. Throughout our armed conflict, the paramilitary committed over 1100 massacres and 9000 selective assassinations, and used brutal methods to terrorize and control people.

In 1998, a Colombian military helicopter bombed a group of people in the province of Arauca thinking they were FARC combatants. Courts said there were civilians killed and injured. The crew serves a 30 year sentence in jail. Media accounts referred to the possible involvement of a private US surveillance plane hired by the Colombian national oil company to protect the pipeline from guerrilla attacks. Ironically, guerrillas had expanded in that region of Colombia thanks to oil royalties they were able to steal and to extortion payments by oil contractors. FARC and ELN are responsible for at least 24,000 kidnappings and more than 4000 attacks against private and public infrastructure in Colombia.

Both paramilitary and guerrillas took war beyond the military battlefield: guerrillas infiltrated local and national unions, county assemblies, civil society organizations and universities; paramilitaries coopted local politicians, congress members and some in the security forces. Both fueled drug trafficking and criminal mining.

The VPs were launched in 2000 and multinational companies operating in Colombia at that time, such as British Petroleum and Occidental, were among the first to implement them out of need and conviction. They asked the Colombian oil association and my Government to support the VPs. I know this because I was there.

I began working for Oxy in 2002 because they needed someone with a different profile and skill set to navigate complexities related to conflict. I implemented the VPs on the ground. I faced some irritated military commanders that thought human rights was simply “left-wing talk”. Others were willing to go along. I helped build trust between unionized workers and security forces; suggested ways other than military actions to approach challenges; helped early guerrilla deserters find their way to legality; and became a staunch supporter of the VPs. Companies could, indeed, make a difference.

Domestic companies also started using the VPs. Isagen, for example, was able to build a hydroelectric in Chaparral --a county with historical FARC presence-- without putting communities in danger. It did so by using VPs-type risk assessments to for see that the entry of a new battalion in the region, meant to

protect the energy project, could potentially lead to problems. Convinced it had the right to protection and that many would benefit from access to electricity, Isagen promoted a local “transparency roundtable” where communities, authorities, police and military addressed human rights concerns together. Some weeks ago, I visited Chaparral and spoke to a peasant leader. He told me how access to credit had been impossible in Chaparral because banks thought of people from that region as guerrilla-sympathizers. Isagen was able to understand the many shades of grey of our conflict and promote peaceful coexistence in Chaparral while at the same time playing by the rules: that is, protecting itself through a legally constituted security force, our army, while ensuring public security understanding of human rights. In Chaparral, everyone is clear about Isagen’s values. Now, the “transparency roundtable” has given way to a new discussion about post-conflict and how the business-community partnership that was once set to manage security issues can be harnessed for the collective implementation of peacebuilding.

Colombia has made the most of the VPs and can now reap the fruits. Companies that have “followed”/ “implemented”/ “complied with” -- use the verb you want --- are today better placed to navigate transition in Colombia, with all its challenges and opportunities. They are better placed to understand new forms of social conflict and avoid its escalation; they know what type of security interventions are helpful or unhelpful; they know how to bring security forces, communities and NGOs to the same table to find common ground; they know how to speak to security forces about change and new standards, which will be paramount as peace and stabilization kick in and public security turn to tasks other than counterinsurgency; they have the right skill sets among staff to part take in new community participatory peacebuilding processes; they know how to build bridges among sectors of societies that have distrusted each other for years; they know how to address intra-community conflict; they know how to address grievances and complaints and are familiar with concepts and principles around remedy; they know how to bring national and local governments together to foster development projects in rural areas. Also, companies who have implemented the VPs will certainly be better placed to interact with the national movement for the Historical Memory of our conflict – an exercise that strengthens a nation’s quest for non-repetition of war and violence.

I know many companies are eager to help out in peacebuilding. Colombia’s post-conflict will certainly go beyond the issue of finding jobs for former combatants. Our peace is about a more profound societal and institutional transformation. Just like what the true adoption of business and human rights standards do to corporate culture. It’s not about ticking the boxes, it’s about forging new relationships based on democratic values.

A strong VPs Initiative is the only way forward for us.

Thanks you.