



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Colombians protest Free Trade Agreement with United States, 2006

15 May

2006

to: 22 November

2006

**Country:** Colombia

**Location City/State/Province:** *La Maria, Cauca*

**Location Description:** *Country-wide campaign, but this is the location of the focus protest*

**Goals:**

For Colombia to reject the Free Trade Agreement with the United States

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 070. Protest emigration (hijrat)
- 138. Sitdown
- 144. Stalling and obstruction

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

**Methods in 4th segment:**

**Methods in 5th segment:**

**Methods in 6th segment:**

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 144. Stalling and obstruction

### Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- Campesinos
- Indigenous Colombians
- and Afro-Cuban Colombians

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC)

**External allies:**

United Nations Refugee Agency, Regional Indigenous Council of Cuba, Colombian governmental officials, Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights

**Involvement of social elites:**

not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- governmental officials
- governmental officials (exit)

**Groups in 2nd Segment:****Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:****Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

Most allies mentioned participated by way of contributing data that provided justification and rationalization for the actions taken by protesters.

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 1 Month*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Colombian Government, United States Government, Police force, Colombian military

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

not known

**Campaigner violence:**

not known

**Repressive Violence:**

Many different forms of repressive violence. Protestors faced attack by both traditional and rubber bullets. Many received bone fractures caused by riot gear. Helicopters were used to spray pepper gas on protestors. Water sources were poisoned. There

was at least one death, four individuals in critical condition, and seventy to eighty injuries recorded during the string of protests in La Maria, alone. Three days into the protests, there were nineteen recorded "disappearances" of individuals.

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

The Free Trade Agreement was signed and put into action, and therefore, the first measure of outcome receives a zero. Indigenous Colombians continue to oppose the agreement, and are still fighting for their agency. However, despite protest domestically and abroad, the FTA was signed yet again in 2011. The campaign saw a tremendous amount of indigenous mobilization for the cause, and many groups around the world continue to show sympathy toward the struggles of Colombians, caused by the FTA.

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The United States proposed the enactment of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Colombia in 2004. The United States said that, by lowering the tariffs in a few markets and by making the majority of the other markets entirely duty-free, it could become more competitive. While the Colombian Government responded positively to such a contract, significant groups declared their opposition.

Indigenous groups, campesinos (small farmers), and Afro-Cuban Colombians were concerned that the FTA would ultimately hurt farmers and increase of the number of farmers raising coca. Further, they expressed concern that their resources, including their seeds, would become patented and inaccessible. The cost of medicine would likely rise, and domestic food sovereignty would be exchanged for incentives for foreign investors. Finally, there was worry that farmers would be forced to eradicate their crops without receiving any form of subsidy, should the FTA pass.

The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) summarized its grievances by stating that the FTA would "turn everything that exists into merchandise and commodities." ONIC called for general opposition toward the FTA.

By the 25th of February 2006, the agreement was on its last steps to becoming finalized.

The first major protest took place on the 15th of May 2006, in the city of La Maria, Cauca. For many indigenous Colombians, the city holds symbolic significance as a sacred place. In addition to indigenous, poor agricultural workers and sympathizers from a number of different backgrounds participated.

Indigenous groups did, however, have a few additional goals for the protest that were specific to them and were related to—if not brought to the forefront by—the FTA. These goals included a request that the government return the land it had taken and had promised to return twenty years before, as well as the discontinuation of the agricultural fumigations that destroyed crops and caused serious health problems.

On the 15th of May 8,000 peaceful protestors occupied the Pan American Highway, which links Cauca and Narino and runs southward into Ecuador.

Police responded with violence. One protestor was shot to death and approximately 70 others were wounded.

Thousands of protesters returned for the following two days, again to be met by violence. Three more protestors were fatally

wounded, and still more sustained serious injuries. Police sprayed pepper gas—a prohibited chemical—at protesters from helicopters. Homes and stores were raided. Water lines running to rural communities were intentionally broken, and water sources on indigenous land were poisoned with herbicide.

Nineteen people became “disappeared,” and the Colombian government refused to release any information on their whereabouts. Some estimates suggest that up to 10,000 protestors received some form of humanitarian aid in those few days.

Indigenous radio stations were destroyed, and the mainstream media largely ignored the protests. The Non-Governmental Committee for the Defense of Human Rights was able to report about the human rights abuses that occurred during the protests, when other media outlets did not. Other allies began to mobilize. Some governmental officials came to the sites of protests to mediate discussions. Many of these officials, however, experienced violence at the hands of the military.

The Colombian Government decided to blame the protests on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Indigenous leaders declared this to be a false accusation to justify the violent repression. Prominent Indigenous leader, Floro Tunubala pointed out that the indigenous had themselves for many years been rejecting, condemning, and resisting the FARC.

The protests in La Maria were the largest of a string of protests throughout the country. Other regions that witnessed opposition to the FTA included Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, and Meta. During the week of the 15th of May, and in a few small-scale protests during the subsequent weeks, it is estimated that 50,000 people took part in the campaign to halt the signing of the FTA.

Between May 2006 and November 2006, the date for decision whether to sign the FTA, protesters acted in fourteen of Colombia’s thirty-two departments.

On the 22nd of November 2006, the Colombian Government passed the FTA. The agreement was renewed in 2011. Despite the agreement, human rights, religious, community, student, and worker opposition toward the FTA continues to exist both in Colombia and among allies of the Colombian opposition abroad.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

It is possible that this campaign both influenced and was influenced by, similar Free Trade Agreements that occurred in nearby countries (Guatemala, Ecuador) during the same year.

### Sources:

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