Religion and Conflict
Case Study Series

Colombia:
Religious Actors Inspiring Reconciliation

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Abstract

This case study explores the complex ways that religious forces have both legitimized and sought to resolve the decades-long conflict in Colombia between the government and various guerrilla and paramilitary organizations, with particular attention paid to the peace efforts of the Roman Catholic Church. The study deals with four questions: What are the historical origins of the conflict in Colombia? How do domestic religious factors influence the conflict as well as inspire efforts for conflict resolution? How important are international religious forces? What role do socioeconomic factors play? In addition to its core text, the case study also includes a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant religious organizations, and a list of further readings.

About this Case Study

This case study was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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Colombia’s ongoing civil conflict, which involves state forces, two major guerrilla organizations, and various paramilitary groups, has plagued the country since the late 1960s. This conflict is not a religious war, but religious actors have played important roles, with some leading conflict resolution efforts and others exacerbating the violence. The most salient religious actor is the Roman Catholic Church, which wields significant influence and political power and represents by far the largest religious community in Colombia. Pastoral documents from the Colombian Conference of Catholic Bishops have guided peace negotiations and have sought to provide ethical guidelines for Colombians regarding questions of peace and conflict. The prominent engagement of religious leaders in the peace process, most recently at the behest of President Alvaro Uribe in 2007, has sometimes placed the proponents in harm’s way. In particular, the violence affects Church personnel working in the rural and poor communities prone to conflict. Faith-based and other grassroots community organizations across the country also provide social services and mediate conflicts at the local level. However, religious justifications also motivate antagonists in the conflict, most notably the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), which was founded by militants espousing a radical form of liberation theology.

Catedral Primada in Bogota
The contemporary armed conflict in Colombia has endured for over 40 years involving leftist guerilla organizations, government security services, right-wing paramilitary groups, and the money and guns of drug traffickers. Major leftist nongovernmental parties to the conflict include the secular Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the much smaller ELN. Both organizations originated in revolutionary-influenced ideology, including the ELN’s roots in the liberation theology of the 1960s.

The right-wing Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) is a grouping of paramilitary organizations that consolidated to combat the rebels in the 1990s. The Colombian government has attempted separate negotiations with each of these groups, with varying degrees of success. The Santa Fe de Ralito Agreement (2003) between the government and the AUC led to a demobilization of 32,000 members. Not all former AUC militants have truly demobilized, however, and many have found their way into new criminal groups, including drug cartels.

The armed conflict in Colombia has been fueled by a blend of popular socioeconomic grievances and, in more recent years, the pervasive influence of drug trafficking. The FARC, Colombia’s most powerful insurgent group, formed in the mid-1960s as a formal affiliate of the Communist Party, an affiliation that broke as the FARC grew closer to the drug trade. The FARC’s strength lies not just in military force but in popular rural resentment against wealthier (urban) Colombians. The government allowed the FARC to exert formal control over large safe zones during negotiations in the late 1990s, but when four years of negotiations failed to produce results, the incoming administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) opted for a hardline military approach that disbanded the demilitarized zone and registered numerous successes. Still, the FARC maintains the ability to conduct a low-level guerilla campaign, and the money and weapons, obtained by illegal armed groups through the narcotics trade, continue to threaten Colombia’s stability.

The ELN has been similarly weakened in recent years. It entered into inconclusive ceasefire negotiations with the Uribe government under Mexican mediation in 2001 and 2002. Then, under the auspices of the Cuban government, the ELN engaged in eight rounds of discussions with Bogotá that ground to a halt in late 2007. The government of President Uribe turned to Catholic officials to mediate the conflict, most notably in an outreach to guerrillas in 2007 and to narco-criminals in 2009.

Since the mid-1990s, the civilian population, weary of a lifetime of war, carried out a series of major demonstrations for peace that were led by civil society groups, including religious actors. For instance, in 1997 a broad network of civil society groups launched the Citizen’s Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty. When local elections took place on October 26 of that year, an alternative election was held in which Colombians were given the chance to cast a vote for peace. Over 10 million did so out of a population of only 38 million, demonstrating the ability of religious and other civil society actors to motivate massive public actions in support of peace. Similarly in 2008, Colombia witnessed massive demonstrations for the release of hostages held by the FARC, with millions of participants all over the world, organized in part through the use of social networking via Facebook.
The FARC was founded on a secular, Marx-inspired ideology. However, the ELN has strong theological underpinnings and, particularly in its early stages, was heavily guided by Catholic liberation theology. The ELN was founded in 1963 by students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals with the hope of emulating Fidel Castro’s communist revolution in Cuba. In particular, Father Camilo Torres Restrepo—a famous university professor in Colombia—gave the movement strong religious justifications. The spirit of the Second Vatican Council, with its emphasis on a social gospel and subsequent “preferential option for the poor,” combined with an aggressive anti-establishment posture, informed the worldview of these militant priests and their organization. Although Torres was killed early in the insurgency, his legacy has remained important within the group and has encouraged other priests to join the movement to promote “the Revolution.”

In the early 1970s, the ELN seemed on the verge of defeat, but Father Manuel Pérez, a Catholic priest from Spain, assumed joint leadership of the organization, for which he was later defrocked. He preached a more extreme version of liberation theology and proposed a “Christian-Communist” solution to the variety of problems that Colombia was facing, fusing insurgent activities with Christian social action in order to gain the support of the local populace. Thus, liberation theology’s belief that one can be liberated by helping oppressed social classes achieve their aspirations and, moreover, that such action can and should be achieved by political activism, ensured that the ELN was infused with a militant form of religious social consciousness. However, with the death of many of the influential religious leaders in the ELN movement, such theological elements faded somewhat from the ELN’s mission statement and identity by the mid-1990s.

The Catholic Church has played multiple roles in Colombia’s history and in the contemporary conflict. In the past, Colombia’s Catholic Church exemplified the Christendom model of the intertwining of church, state, and society, and Colombia’s Church remains one of the most powerful in Latin America. Traditionally, it was identified with conservative political actors, but in the post-Vatican II era, the Church has become increasingly nonpartisan, particularly in prioritizing economic development for Colombia’s poor. Vast social service and community networks have given faith leaders of all denominations the ability to reach into areas controlled by both leftist and right-wing paramilitary organizations, where they are often seen as honest brokers for dialogue. As Monsignor Jaime Prieto, bishop of Barrancabermeja said, “My motivation is to achieve the salvation of the people, albeit with danger to my own life… The church has to talk with everyone. Our goal is to fight against evil, not against the evildoer… To fight against sin, not against the sinner.” Faith leaders have promoted a just negotiated settlement between the parties and have worked with government and civil society organizations to build a lasting peace through Colombia’s National Conciliation Commission (NCC).

Numerous specific peacebuilding initiatives have been influenced by religious actors. For instance, the NCC (founded in 1995) is a partnership of Church and other civil society leaders dedicated to finding a political solution to the Colombian conflict rather than a military
victory for one side. After building relationships for a
decade, the NCC facilitated discussions between the
government and the FARC in December 2007. Like-
wise, the Catholic Church’s Conferencia Episcopal Co-
lombiana (CEC) has been involved in numerous nego-
tiation processes with the FARC. Their efforts first bore
fruit in 1984, with a short-lived ceasefire between the
FARC and government forces, which led to the estab-
ishment of the office of the High Commissioner for
Peace (now subsumed into the High Commissioner for
Reintegration). Furthermore, countless religious indi-
viduals have played key roles in building peace at the
local level. One example is Bishop Julio César Vidal Or-
tiz, whose diocese was in AUC-controlled territory. He
led mediation efforts and played a vital role in bringing
negotiations to a successful end, resulting in the demo-
bilization of 32,000 AUC fighters by April 2006.

However, as the FARC and ELN have delved deeper
into drug peddling, kidnapping, and racketeering (such
as “protecting” oil pipelines for a price), religious lead-
ers and sites have increasingly been the target of attacks
and kidnappings, with 2002 producing a number of no-
table examples. The first, on March 17, saw Archbishop
Isaías Duarte Cancino gunned down after saying Mass
in Cali. Archbishop Duarte was an outspoken critic of
militant violence and had condemned links between
guerrillas and drug traffickers. He excommunicated
members of the ELN in 1999 after the ELN kidnapped
Catholics attending Mass. Bishop Jorge Enrique Jimé-
nez Carvajal of Zipaquirá, who was later kidnapped by
the FARC, said the following on Spanish television: “It
is a pity that the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Co-
lombia (FARC) are seeking social justice by commit-
ting the worst injustices, such as depriving a person of
his liberty. Social justice will never be the product of
injustice, never… It is impossible for injustice to pro-
duce justice. This is the tragedy of all that we are going
through in our country.” While Bishop Jimenez was
rescued by the military, Protestant ministers José Vi-
cente Flórez and Abel Ruiz were also assassinated that
summer. On May 2, 117 villagers were killed when a
guerrilla mortar landed in a Bojaya church where civil-
ians sought shelter from fighting militant groups. The
FARC was responsible for firing the improvised mortar,
but the United Nations also judged the AUC respon-
sible for using those in the church as human shields.

In addition to Catholic leadership, a number of other
religious efforts have influenced the course of the con-
flict. While non-Catholic denominations make up only
about 10 percent of the Colombian population, Protes-
tant and ecumenical organizations like Justapaz, Christian Peacemak-
er Teams, and World Vision have made significant contributions to
local and national peacebuilding ef-

torts.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Co-
lombia’s recent president, Álvaro
Uribe, was unusually demonstrative
in his faith, attending public masses
and pilgrimages and authorizing
the Catholic Church to act as an
official intermediary to guerrillas.
When border tensions flared with
neighboring Venezuela, he invited
the Venezuelan ambassador to join
him in praying for peace.

Demonstration against FARC
While Colombia’s domestic religious leaders have had an important independent impact on the course of peace-making, international religious actors have complemented them. The Catholic Church’s international hierarchy has publicly supported the peacebuilding work of Colombian bishops, including a visit from Pope John Paul II in 1986 during the United Nations’ World Year of Peace. Pope Benedict XVI continued this tradition of support for peacebuilding. Regional Catholic leaders have played a similarly supportive role. Colombia is home to the Consejo Episcopal Latinamericano (CELAM), the regional bishops’ conference. CELAM has worked in close cooperation with the Colombian bishops’ conference on its efforts to mediate a settlement between militants and the Colombian government. CELAM’s former president, Bishop Jorge Enrique Jiménez Carvajal, was one of the aforementioned kidnapping victims of the FARC in 2002; he was eventually rescued by the Colombian government.

In addition to these high-profile international religious leaders, a variety of international religious NGOs, both Catholic and non-Catholic, have worked for years on peacebuilding in Colombia. Catholic nonprofits like Pax Christi International and Catholic Relief Services have active Colombia programs dedicated to peacebuilding and human development. Other interfaith groups like the Fellowship of Reconciliation have supported grassroots “Peace Communities,” networks of local citizens who band together to increase economic opportunity and denounce intimidation and paramilitary violence. These Peace Communities are a powerful instrument against the fear that armed groups encourage and exploit, and their members have been the target of assassinations and kidnappings in many regions. The multinational Christian Peacemaking Teams (CPT) organization has an active Colombia program, primarily in the Magdalena Medio region. Their work focuses on building citizen networks dedicated to protecting innocents from the conflict and raising national and international awareness of the plight of those caught in the crossfire of the Colombian conflict. CPT has also worked with local farmers and miners to protect them from exploitation by militants and drug traffickers. These and many other international religious NGOs such as Caritas International and Church World Service continue to influence aspects of the Colombian conflict by working in partnership with local civil society and community leaders.

Fellowship of Reconciliation member with a family in La Unión
Religion and Socioeconomic Factors

Colombia remains among the most Catholic countries in South America, with 90 percent of the population identifying as Roman Catholic. There are some ethnic differences within Colombia, with 58 percent of the country identifying as mestizo, 20 percent as white, and 14 percent as mulatto. There are also some African and Amerindian populations. Perhaps the most significant demographic divide in relation to the Colombian conflict is that between urban and rural areas. Colombia has one of South America’s most urbanized populations, with an urbanization rate of over 75 percent, but the rugged mountains and rainforests of the rural areas make government control difficult. The rural areas have been strongholds of the ELN and FARC. It is estimated that half of rural Colombians do not have access to sanitation services, that rural illiteracy runs at 16 percent, as opposed to 7 percent nationally, and the estimated rural poverty rate is 69 percent. The significant disparity between urban and rural development and the perceived abandonment of the countryside by the government has been used by leftist guerillas to build public support in rural areas.

From the outbreak of the insurgency, socioeconomic grievances and political exclusion have been at the heart of the Colombian conflict. These economic issues played a crucial role in weakening traditional Catholic clerical support for conservatives in the Colombian government in the 1960s through the 1980s. In 1998, the Colombian Conference of Bishops declared, “Peace therefore demands firm, constant efforts to work for social justice and sustainable human development, which implies deep structural reforms and a political will that leads all sectors of society to a commitment to peace. The social doctrine of the Church offers basic criteria for authentic development that benefits everyone, especially those who are most in need. In the words of Pope Paul VI, ‘Development is the new name for peace.’” Nevertheless, the high-level of rural poverty and lack of government-provided security has driven many farmers to the lucrative cultivation of coca for Colombia’s powerful narcotraffickers. While Colombia’s economy has been improving and education and women’s economic empowerment are fairly strong nationally, addressing the challenges of rural development remains a daunting task for those trying to resolve Colombia’s armed conflict. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether even substantial economic development, one of the FARC’s stated aims, would quell the violence by leftist guerillas or narcotraffickers that benefit from conditions of insecurity.

Religious communities have been heavily involved in some of the most novel strategies for addressing this prevalent rural poverty. The Regional Peace and Development Program exists in half of Colombia’s 33 provinces and has attracted national and international funding due to their innovative approaches and apparent successes. The Peace and Development Program began in 1995 in the Magdalena Medio region with leadership that included the local archdiocese and the Jesuit non-profit CINEP (Popular Investigation and Education Center). The program works with local residents, farmers, business leaders and government officials to fund local-led sustainable economic development projects. Over 300 such projects have been funded in Magdalena Medio, and the Peace and Development Program model has been expanded around the country in partnership with Christian faith communities. The program functions effectively in large part because its ties to local churches give it credibility with local residents, and program projects have been careful to avoid partisan alliance with any side in the armed conflict.

Due to Colombia’s decades-long conflict, the country recently surpassed Sudan in terms of having the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world—over 3 million. These individuals have largely found refuge in Colombia’s urban areas, in neighboring countries like Ecuador and Venezuela, and in the United States. Most of those displaced persons come from rural areas that are contested between the sides of the conflict. Both the guerillas and the paramilitaries made it a regular policy to dispossess residents of their land in order to assert control over territory. The United Nations and other international NGOs work on the IDP issue, but it continues to challenge peacemakers and put a serious strain on Colombia’s urban areas.
Conclusion

Colombia is a society marked by decades of ideological and criminal violence. For over four decades, the FARC and the ELN have carried out violent insurgencies against the government. The latter, smaller group espoused an ideology rooted in liberation theology’s “preferential option for the poor,” arguing for a radical transformation of Colombian society on behalf of the underprivileged. However, critics note that the kidnappings, drug trafficking, and murders perpetrated by the ELN and other non-state actors in Colombia do not comport with Catholic social teaching. Religious actors have also been key agents for peace, whether through individual priests engaging local insurgents in order to release hostages or high-level efforts by the Roman Catholic Church or outside intermediaries, such as Mennonites, to resolve the conflict. During the Uribe presidency, the Roman Catholic Church was authorized by the government to play a role in engaging not only insurgents but also right-wing militias. During that period, 32,000 AUC paramilitaries disbanded. The critical work of religious actors for peace, security, humanitarian assistance, and development continues in Colombia, but so does the violence perpetrated by terrorist and criminal groups.

Demonstrators light candles to protest the killing of politicians by leftist rebels in June 2007.
Key Events

1984 The Catholic Church’s Conferencia Episcopal Colombiana brokers a ceasefire between FARC and Colombian government.

1995 National Conciliation Commission (NCC) formed by the Church hierarchy in partnership with other civil society leaders.

1997 Religious and civil society actors launch Citizen’s Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty, garnering 10 million “votes for peace”.

2002 CELAM’s President, Bishop Jorge Jimenez Carvajal, kidnapped by the FARC and eventually rescued by the Colombian government.

2006 AUC completes demobilization of 31,000 members; brokered by Catholic Church.

2007 NCC hosts peace dialogue between government and FARC leaders.
**Religious Organizations**

**Colombian Conference of Bishops (Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia, CEC)**

*http://cec.org.co/

The Colombian Conference of Bishops has been an active participant in many of the negotiations aimed at ending the Colombian civil conflict. While the Catholic hierarchy in Colombia was traditionally aligned with conservative political interests, the bishops diversified ideologically in the second half of the twentieth century. This has distanced them from partisan politics and enabled priests and bishops to serve as effective mediators between both leftist and right-wing militant organizations. Statements from the hierarchy’s plenary assemblies have influenced political debates and inspired civil society actors. The CEC has also promoted a National Permanent Peace Policy as a strategy for sustainable peacebuilding.

**National Social Ministry Secretariat (Secretariado Nacional de Pastoral Social, SNPS)**

*http://pastoralsocial.org/

The SNPS is the secretariat for social ministry of Caritas Colombia—the Catholic Church's official social service umbrella group in the country. It carries out a wide variety of social service and advocacy work, including several programs aimed at ending Colombia’s armed conflict. Most of these programs are housed through SNPS’s Life, Justice and Peace Office (Vida, Justicia y Paz, VJP). Among the VJP’s programs are a women peacebuilders training program, partnerships with the Society of Jesus on Mobile Schools for Peace, and the Tevere program focusing on post-conflict reconciliation and documenting human rights abuses.

**Council of Latin-American Bishops (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, CELAM)**

*http://celam.org/

CELAM, headquartered in Colombia and heavily influenced by Colombian clerics, has worked in partnership with the Colombian Catholic hierarchy on a variety of peace initiatives. CELAM was integrally involved in the development of “liberation theology” with its preferential option for the poor and focus on sinful social structures, from its 1968 General Conference at Medellín, Colombia. Additionally, CELAM played an important role in promoting “ecclesial base communities,” grassroots ministry organizations that have played active roles in conflict mediation and human rights protection in Colombia and across Latin America.

**Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias: Secretaria Regional Caribe y Gran Colombia**

*http://claiweb.org/region%20gan%20colombia%20y%20caribe/principal.htm

The Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) is an ecumenical Christian organization affiliated with the World Council of Churches. It includes both a regional program focused on Colombia and a Culture of Peace program that works extensively on Colombian peacebuilding. CLAI declared 2001 through 2010 the Decade to Overcome Violence, which included programming encouraging churches to support families in building homes for peace. A number of CLAI member churches, such as the Presbyterian Church and the Colombian Episcopal Church, have been active within their own denominational structures in Colombian peacemaking as well.
El Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP)
http://cinep.org.co/
Founded by the Jesuits in 1972, CINEP is a peace and development research center that investigates the Colombian conflict. In addition to research reports, CINEP serves as an important research clearinghouse for data related to the military conflict, trade unions, civil society, human rights violations, and media coverage of the conflict. CINEP also plays a central role in training local peace advocates, working in partnership with grassroots community development organizations to encourage the work of community activists.

La Red Nacional de Iniciativas Ciudadanas por la Paz y Contra la Guerra
http://redepaz.org.co/
The National Network of Citizen Initiatives for Peace and Against War (REDEPAZ) was founded in 1993 as a collaborative effort between various civil society organizations, including faith communities, human rights organizations, and development workers. REDEPAZ runs a wide spectrum of programs in promotion of peace, including a program focused on mothers who have been impacted by the conflict and a youth training program. REDEPAZ has recently prioritized liberation of captives held hostage by various sides of the conflict. Its Municipalities of Peace program has been an innovative grassroots success, establishing 100 local areas in which civil society leaders work on conflict resolution and the peaceful pursuit of development and human rights.

JUSTAPAZ (Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Non-Violent Action)
http://justapaz.org/
Justapaz was founded in 1990 by the Mennonite Church in Colombia to promote peacebuilding through non-violence and social justice. Justapaz works in Colombia at both the local and national level, and has developed a network of Sanctuary of Peace Churches where violence is condemned and refuge is given to people on all sides of the conflict. Justapaz also documents human rights violations suffered by Protestant religious communities, who are a highly vulnerable minority population often at odds with militant organizations. Because of its Mennonite dedication to nonviolence as a means of social change, Justapaz has done extensive work on promoting conscientious objection to military service and the demilitarization of Colombian society. Justapaz works closely with other Protestant churches and with a variety of Catholic and secular civil society organizations.

Escuela de Paz y Convivencia Ciudadana
The Jesuit Mobile School for Peace and Citizen Coexistence Program is a partnership between Caritas Colombia and the Jesuit Program for Peace. Founded in 1996, these training academies have worked with over 13,000 community leaders to build conflict resolution skills to use in their home communities around Colombia. Curricula in these schools vary from region to region but are overseen by Javeriana University in order to ensure the quality of theological training and mediation skills passed on to participants. The Schools for Peace and Coexistence reach Colombians in both rural and urban areas and attempt to work both with established lay and clergy leaders as well as young Colombians who will serve as the next generation's leaders for peace.
Mencoldes: Fundación Menonita Colombiana Para el Desarrollo (Colombian Mennonite Foundation for Development)

http://fundacionmencoldes.org/

Mencoldes is a Colombian Mennonite relief organization that is loosely affiliated with international organizations like the Mennonite Central Committee. It aims to bring development assistance and humanitarian relief to needy areas in Colombia. Mencoldes places special priority on economic and integration assistance for persons displaced by the armed conflict. Women’s groups are a particularly important part of this work because women and children make up a disproportionate number of Colombian IDPs. This work is particularly important in urban centers like Bogota, where Mencoldes works with over 2,000 IDPs a year as they build new lives in Colombia’s largest city.

Lutheran World Relief (LWR) Colombia

http://lwr.org/site/c.dmJXKiOYJgl6G/b.7504399/k.D4CF/Colombia.htm

Lutheran World Relief was founded in 1945 in order to respond to the needs of communities devastated by World War Two. LWR has been working in Colombia since the late 1990s, focusing primarily on the support of marginalized and internally displaced persons. As the mission evolved, LWR extended their programs to also focus on transforming the conflict more generally and attempting to build peace and justice in the region. Geographically, LWR’s work is concentrated on Montes de María (an inland region between Cartagena and Sincelejo) as well as areas around Bucaramanga.

Church World Service Colombia

http://www.cwsglobal.org/where-we-work/latin-america-caribbean/

Church World Service (CWS) was founded in 1946, and consists of a cooperative ministry of 35 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox denominations. It aims to bring Christians together to help fight poverty and hunger and to promote peace and justice. In Colombia CWS concentrates on the large-scale displacement problem and the negative impacts that such displacement has had upon people’s lives. CWS concentrates on raising awareness about the plight of IDPs in Colombia, providing basic necessities for those most in need, and, where possible, relocating some IDPs to the United States.

Catholic items sold outside Las Lajas sanctuary in Nariño
Further Readings

Cynthia Arnson, co-editor, Peace and Security in Colombia (Woodrow Wilson Center, United States Institute of Peace, InterAmerican Dialogue, 2003).


Justapaz and the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace, A Prophetic Call: Colombian Protestant Churches Document Their Suffering and Their Hope (Bogota, August 2006).


Discussion Questions

1. What are the historical origins of the conflict in Colombia?

2. How do domestic religious factors influence the conflict as well as inspire efforts at conflict resolution?

3. How important are international religious forces?

4. What role do socioeconomic factors played?

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8 For information about the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Program, see http://c-r.org/our-work/accord/colombia/regional-peace-experience.php