



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

El Testigo (The Witness)

Friday, September 20, 2019

2:00 – 4:00 p.m.

122 Cannon House Office Building

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission screening of the Colombian film *El Testigo*, which means “The Witness.” It’s good to see you here.

I’d like to extend a special welcome to Jesús Abad Colorado, the award-winning freelance photojournalist whose stunning images are the basis for the film.

Chucho has witnessed some of the most infamous and violent episodes of Colombia’s internal armed conflict. His camera has captured atrocities committed by all sides – by the FARC in Bojayá in 2002, by the army and paramilitaries in San José de Apartadó in 2005, and countless others – his photos span 25 years.

We’ve all heard the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words. That phrase seems especially true when it comes to war.

A photo can communicate the human cost of war with an immediacy and an urgency that words can lack. A photo goes straight to our hearts – we feel the suffering of people who, in the end, are not so different from us.

Chucho’s photos are like that – they draw us in, they make us feel how agonizingly hard it has been to live through Colombia’s war. They envelop us in the loss, the sorrow and the destruction.

But the film then goes a step further. It shows us hope.

As Colombia's peace process was underway, Chucho sought out the subjects of some of his photos, talked to them about their lives, and asked them what they thought of the images he had taken.

Those conversations reveal the strength of Colombians, their capacity for resistance and their openness to the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are conversations that make peace seem within reach.

Yet the official peace process – the formal peace accord reached in 2016 between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas – is fragile.

Implementation has been slow and uneven.

Key components like the transitional justice system and political participation by former guerrilla leaders have come under constant attack.

Human rights defenders, community organizers, afro-descendent and indigenous leaders and demobilized guerrillas are being killed systematically.

In August, a sector of the FARC decided to re-arm.

There is a gap between what those who suffer the conflict want, need and are capable of, and what Colombia's current leaders are delivering.

However imperfect the peace accord, it's better than war.

And frankly, it's a pretty good peace accord. It addresses the deeply rooted structural causes of the war. Were the accord to be fully implemented, it would transform the country – which is the reason it provokes opposition.

Colombia is at a critical juncture. It can choose to build peace, as hard as that is, or it can stay mired in unending war. If the peace process fails, another generation – at least – will be lost.

I hope you come away from this film understanding that the people who should matter in Colombia – the victims, the survivors, those who've suffered the most – want peace. And we should be doing everything in our power to help them get it.

Thank you.