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Bottling Coke and spilling blood

By Juan Gonzalez

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Coca-Cola may say it's The Real Thing, but workers at Coke bottling plants in violence-torn Colombia call it the Real Dead Thing.

Just ask Juan Carlos Galvis. He's a leader of Colombia's national food workers union, which represents employees at about a dozen Coca-Cola bottling plants throughout the country.

In a federal suit Galvis filed in Miami two years ago against Atlanta-based Coke and several of its Colombian bottling partners, the union said that at least six of its leaders have been murdered since 1989 by death squads, which it claims secretly worked for local Coca-Cola plant managers.

Colombia is the murder capital of the world. A 40-year-old civil war, a decades-long government campaign against drug traffickers and an infamously brutal military have led to near anarchy and more than 35,000 deaths.

But few people realize that Colombia is an especially notorious killing field for union leaders.

Some 213 trade union leaders were murdered worldwide in 2002, according to the London-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

Of those, 184 died in Colombia.

Since 1986, nearly 4,000 Colombia union leaders have been assassinated - including 400 from the national teachers union alone. Virtually none of the killers have been brought to justice.

Juan Luis Londoño, Colombia's minister of social protection, admitted earlier this year that the murders of union leaders are an "international disaster." The government has resorted to paying for bodyguards for hundreds of labor leaders whose lives are threatened.

Labor leaders and human rights organizations say most killings of union leaders are carried out by right-wing death squads secretly working for companies that wish to get rid of their unions.

Carlos Castaño, the head of Colombia's largest death squad, has publicly boasted of his efforts.

"Trade unionists prevent people from working. It is for that reason that we kill them," Castaño said in a June 2001 magazine interview. At the time, Castaño was on the run after several murder convictions in Colombia. He has since been indicted in the U.S. for drug trafficking.

One of those targeted for death by Castaño's group was Coca-Cola union leader Juan Carlos Galvis. On Aug. 22 Galvis narrowly escaped when two men in a motorcycle opened fire on his car. Fortunately, Galvis' government-paid bodyguards drove off the assassins.

"This happened in broad daylight outside a public school as students were leaving the building," Galvis said last week during a visit to New York. "I'm just grateful none of those children was hurt."

Some of his union brothers have not been so lucky.

In April 1994, Jose Eleazar Manco and Luis Enrique Gomez, members of a local at another Coca-Cola bottling plant in the town of Carepa, were murdered.

Then, in September 1996, union leaders complained to Coca-Cola and to its two main bottling companies in Colombia - Panamco and Bebidas Y Alimentos de Uraba - that plant managers were employing death squads.

According to the Miami suit, less than three months later, on Dec. 5, 1996, assailants shot dead union leader Isidro Segundo Gil at the entrance of the Carepa plant during contract negotiations, then set fire to the union hall.

Two days later, the killers returned to the factory and assembled the workers at gunpoint.

"The paramilitaries explained that the workers had the option of either resigning from the union or leaving Carepa altogether lest they be killed," the suit stated.

The workers resigned en masse.

The charges made by the union "are completely false," said Coca-Cola spokeswoman Lori Billingsley. "They are nothing more than a shameless effort to generate publicity using the name of our company."

Last March, U.S. District Judge Jose Martinez dismissed any allegations against Coca-Cola but ruled that the charges against Coke's bottling partners Panamco and Bebidas Y Alimentos could go to trial in Miami.

"If Coke tells the Colombian bottlers to do something, you can bet they do it," said Terry Collingsworth, the Miami lawyer for the Colombia union, which is appealing the dismissal of the charges against Coke.

Collingsworth noted that key directors of Coca-Cola sit on the board of directors of Panamco, and that Coke's major bottling subsidiary in Mexico, whose largest shareholder is Coca-Cola, recently purchased Panamco outright.

Panamco has protested the judge's decision to allow the case to proceed to trial, arguing that it cannot be tried in an American court for alleged violations in Colombia.

Coca-Cola insists that it protects workers' rights wherever the company operates.

"We feel that this is just the beginning of a process that will lead to a dismissal [of the suit] against our bottling partners," Billingsley said.

Meantime, Coca-Cola's Colombian union leaders have called for a worldwide boycott of Coke products until the Atlanta-based giant stops the killings and violence at its bottling plants.

Already some key U.S. unions, like the United Steel Workers, have joined the call. And that's the real thing.