

# How to become a PBI volunteer



British volunteer Tessa Mackenzie with David Gordon-Macleod of the British Embassy in Colombia, and Marco Tulio, ex-member of CREDHOS (far left), Colombia 1998. Photo: PBI

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*"The accompaniment volunteers are a living bridge between the threatened activists and the outside world, and also between their own home communities and the reality of the global struggle for human rights. [They] experience a rare privilege of standing at the side of some of the world's most courageous and committed activists."*

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Liam Mahony & Luis Enrique Eguren,  
"Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights", Kumarian Press, 1997

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Since it first began, PBI has sent out hundreds of volunteers to countries in conflict whose people have asked for our help. PBI is currently looking at the possibility of opening new projects following requests from several countries. The need for PBI's services is ever-expanding, and so is the need for volunteers.

## **So what kind of person becomes a PBI volunteer?**

PBI volunteers are people with a strong belief in non-violence, peace and the work of PBI - people who have a good understanding of what human rights are.

They can work under pressure with tact and diplomacy. And because they live with other volunteers for at least a year, maturity and a sense of humour are vital.

While no volunteer has ever been seriously injured working on a project, it is important to be aware that the work does present many challenges and is certainly not glamorous. But the right person can gain important experience and make a lasting contribution working on a PBI team.

All volunteers are carefully chosen and trained by PBI. They go through a rigorous selection process to be chosen for a project group. Prospective PBI volunteers in Britain attend an orientation weekend to help them decide whether volunteering for PBI is

what they really want to do. It is not just a selection process; it's a process of self-evaluation, to work out if they are personally cut out to deal with the challenges of volunteering. If successful, they are invited for seven to ten days of project training. If they get through that, then they can begin to work on the project.

Every project has slightly different needs for its volunteers, but all projects require a good level of fluency in the relevant language. Most PBI volunteers are over 25 years of age.

Emma Eastwood was a British PBI volunteer on a project in Guatemala. She remembers, one day, seeing the charred remains of a small wellington boot. She was in the Guatemalan jungle, witnessing the uncovering of a mass grave. She had seen the remains of an entire village that had been massacred by death squads. But it was the wellington boot that triggered her feelings:

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*"This was such a personal object. We were all trying to hide our emotions. A local priest told me how he coped with the suffering and misery. He said, 'We have to do what we are doing so that this can never happen again.'"*

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**If you think you might be interested in becoming a PBI volunteer, please complete the enclosed application form and return it to PBI UK.**

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**If you are not looking to volunteer, but would simply like to support PBI you could become a member by sending us your membership form today**

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# PBI Volunteer Selection Criteria

## LANGUAGE

It is essential that volunteers are able to communicate fluently in the language of the project. Team members live and work constantly in these languages. Nearly all contacts, official and social, are made in the language of the country. It is therefore necessary on a professional, personal and emotional level to speak the language well. For some projects, the willingness of candidates to learn other languages used in the country is also a requirement.

## POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The ability to analyse political situations allows all team members to have greater insight into the workings of the country's political system and encourages better foresight and planning in the team's decisions.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE COUNTRY

It is also essential to have a good knowledge of the history, political situation and culture of the country.

## NON-VIOLENCE, NON-PARTISANSHIP & NON-INTERVENTION

An understanding of the theory and practice of non-violence is an important skill for anyone considering volunteering. It gives insight into the reality of conflict and PBI's role within that conflict. Potential volunteers must also have a thorough understanding of all the principles of PBI's work in order to become clear about non-violence, non-partisanship and non-intervention.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS & DIPLOMACY

PBI volunteers need to be able to deal confidently with public relations since teams maintain cordial relations with many groups, including popular movement organisations, NGOs and governmental bodies. Team members have access to a lot of information that needs to be carefully analysed and utilised.

In a conflict situation the emphasis on accurate information is paramount, as is a flow of up to date information within the team. Volunteers must be particularly aware of the possible consequences and harm resulting from misuse of information or breach of confidentiality.

## REPORT WRITING & ADMINISTRATION

A large part of PBI's work involves the handling of information, so written and oral experience in writing reports, articles, etc. would be very useful. Experience of working with computers, creating and maintaining office systems and office management skills are also desirable.

## MANAGING STRESS

The team often has to work through periods of extreme stress and tension due to a particular political situation, levels of work or interpersonal tensions. It is therefore crucial for each member to be able to manage their stress and work efficiently to meet deadlines under pressure.

## LIVING AND WORKING IN A GROUP

In a PBI team you will be living and working very closely with a group of people. The size of the team varies but the ability to cope with and appreciate this situation is essential to PBI volunteers.

In addition, team members live and work together in relatively small spaces; members must be able to function with the different rhythms and styles of the other members. Problems within the team can quickly begin to affect the quality of external work: to deal with such situations all volunteers must be tolerant of one another, their opinions and idiosyncrasies and be prepared to work to resolve interpersonal tensions.

## FLEXIBILITY

The level and type of work being requested of the team often changes rapidly and with very little notice, thus an ability to learn quickly, take on board new ideas and concepts, read into situations and rapidly assess their significance are vital characteristics of a PBI volunteer.

## CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Sensitivity and respect towards other cultures (enhanced by the experience of working in a substantially different culture) is an important requisite in facilitating team integration and building an understanding of how the project country works.

## OTHER

It is necessary to take part in housekeeping duties (cooking, cleaning, etc). Knowledge of photography or IT, for example, would also be useful.

## EMOTIONAL PREPARATION

At the core of PBI's work is the potential and real threat of violence. Before starting work with a team and with the help of the country group, each volunteer needs to seriously consider a series of personal and emotional questions. This process of raising self-awareness and openly acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses, is crucial preparation for the effective management of stressful situations volunteers will almost certainly encounter.

Without this awareness it can be difficult to address issues that may arise during a period on the team and this can be harmful both to the individual volunteer and the team as a whole.

The following areas should be considered:

- *personal limitations, fears and prejudices*
- *motives for and expectations of volunteering with PBI*
- *the role which PBI and the individual volunteer plays in the conflict*
- *your own political convictions*
- *your views on being non-partisan, especially given that many PBI volunteers come from very politically active backgrounds in their own country*
- *the possibility of your own death*
- *the possibility of torture*

Working with PBI can be very difficult emotionally. This can be especially true when a volunteer returns: the reverse culture shock can be intense for even the most experienced traveller.

## VOLUNTEER TRAINING

There is a period of preparation before joining a PBI team.

### **First step:**

#### **Attending the Orientation Weekend**

Potential volunteers will attend an orientation weekend organised by a country group such as PBI UK. These weekends occur four times a year. They are an introduction to the principles, philosophy and work of PBI through workshops and informative presentations.

At the end of the orientation weekend, candidates are offered the possibility of having a quiet get together with the trainers in order for candidates to self-evaluate their suitability in progressing to the next step of the training process.

The Management Committee of PBI UK then decides on the suitability of candidates to attend a regional training on the basis of the trainers' recommendations and the self-evaluation of the candidate.

### **Second step:**

#### **Attending project-specific regional training**

In the second stage of the process, candidates will attend a regional training organised by the project of interest. Projects run two regional trainings a year in both Europe and North America.

This 7-10 day training covers the history and current political situation in the project country, the conflict causes and PBI's role there. Applicants will explore possible situations in which team members may find themselves. At the end of the training candidates will be informed of their suitability to join the project.



# PBI VOLUNTEER APPLICATION FORM

## Personal Information

Name	Date
Address	
Email	
Telephone	
Date of Birth	
Nationality	

## Team Volunteer (Please tick projects you are interested in)

Colombia Project	<input type="checkbox"/>	Indonesia Project	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mexico Project	<input type="checkbox"/>	Office volunteer in London	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Skills (Please list any skills relevant to this work)

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## Computer knowledge / skills

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## Languages

First language				
Other languages (indicate degree of fluency: A-fluent, B-strong, C-good, D-fair, E-weak)				
Language	Speak	Write	Read	Understand

**Education** (Brief details of your education and qualifications)

**Employment** (Brief details of any paid/unpaid employment)

**Overseas work** (Brief details of any work undertaken outside the UK)

**Why do you want to work for PBI?**

**Thank you for your application.**

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