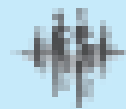


LET IT BE KNOWN

INTERNALLY DISPLACED  
**COLOMBIANS**  
SPEAK OUT



NORWEGIAN  
REFUGEE COUNCIL

**iDMC** internal  
displacement  
monitoring  
centre

ISBN: 978-958-44-1258-4

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The photographic images that accompany these life stories are part of the radiography of the country and its inhabitants, achieved through the sensitive and acute eyes of professional and amateur photographers who have participated in meetings organized by the Fundación Dos Mundos. These photographers utilize the image as a tool for sensitizing and training people with respect to the psycho-social implications of the violation of human rights in Colombia. The photographs that appear in this book are not of the interviewees.

Photo back cover:

Pseudonym: Terry

Archive Fundación Dos Mundos,

Exhibition "Las otras huellas de la guerra".



PANOS  
LONDON

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Bogotá, June 2007

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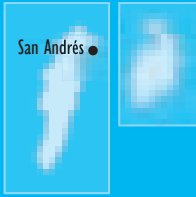
## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of the Life Stories Project, which culminates in the publication of this book, would not have been possible without the voluntary participation of many people and, most especially, that of the displaced people who opened their hearts and told their stories. We are profoundly grateful to them. Without them, this book would not exist. We would also like to thank the non-governmental human rights organizations in Colombia which have consistently demanded respect for the rights of displaced people. They offered human resources and facilitated contact with a large number of the narrators.

Finally, this project was made possible by the contributions of many other people committed to the displaced population both inside and outside of Colombia. We would especially like to thank:

- Alfredo Molano, Colombian writer and journalist.
- Corporación Colectivo de Abogados (Collective Corporation of Lawyers) Luis Carlos Pérez, a human rights organization that accompanies the displaced population in educational, organizational and legal affairs in Santander and Norte de Santander. It also accompanies the Barí Indian people in the Catatumbo region.
- Corporación Jurídica (Legal Corporation) Yira Castro, non-governmental human rights organization, specializing in legal advice for displaced people.
- Barí Iquiacacona People of Catatumbo (Norte de Santander)
- Community of Self-Determination, Life and Dignity of Cacarica (Chocó)
- Inhabitants of the Humanitarian Zones of Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó (Chocó)
- Mirjam Koppe
- María Henao-Acosta
- Arild Birkenes

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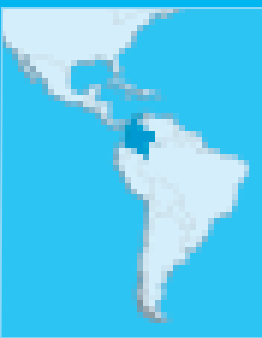
SAN ANDRÉS, PROVIDENCIA AND SANTA CATALINA



PANAMÁ

PACIFIC OCEAN

ECUADOR



PERÚ

ATLANTIC OCEAN

VENEZUELA

BRASIL

## PROLOGUE

The people whose life stories appear in this book bear witness to experience of internal displacement. Men and women, old and young – all of them civilians – tell the stories of what it meant to them to flee their homes and to leave everything behind, with little prospect of return. “I just left with my clothes on,” one person said.

This book is not about issues of internal displacement as a theme, it is about the real lives of real people. It is about communicating personal experiences, biographies and the impact of displacement which complements more quantitative and factual data. The focus is on capturing the feelings, tones of voice and the spirit behind the vivid experiences. This places the internally displaced persons at the centre by giving them the opportunity to speak out in their own words on issues which concern them, rather than having their needs and priorities interpreted by outsiders. The stories stand alone and are neither interpreted nor analysed, they offer images, a human face, sensations, feelings, hopes and dreams, and above all the experience of being displaced in the Colombia of today. “One of the strategies in Colombia – besides making the conflict invisible – is to debate numbers rather than human faces; this results in a lack of understanding of the significance of displacement” said a life story interviewer.

By publishing this book, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) hope to raise awareness and new insights of the often-overlooked plight of some 3.8 million people internally displaced by armed conflict and human rights violations in Colombia. It is fundamental for the displaced themselves and for the prospects for peace that experiences of this nature are recognised by others, and particularly by the international community.

The project was piloted and rolled out in Colombia together with Panos London (an organisation which specialises in oral testimonies), various local human rights organisations and the displaced themselves. Nine people from four different regions of Colombia and with a wide range of backgrounds (four displaced people, a social worker, three psychologists and a lawyer) were involved in the life story project and were trained to become interviewers. It was deemed important that people with a mix of skills and backgrounds should be involved as interviewers of the displaced. This was in order to ensure that they could gather multiple voices that highlight the variety of the experience of displacement in Colombia. All the interviewers had knowledge of displacement, some from their professional

experience of working with the displaced, and others had been – and sometimes still were – displaced themselves. A total of 54 interviews were collected between April and August 2006, of which 19 are presented in this book.

This project was of dual benefit. It aimed both at having the voices of the displaced persons heard and at empowering the participants through training. The training included methods on how to conduct life stories and interviews as well as reinforcing skills around the importance of listening without judgement to the displaced. They learned how to handle difficult security situations, and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as a framework for rights. The participants also worked on thematic issues, including the psychosocial aspects of interviewing traumatised persons. Finally, they drew up criteria for the selection of stories and developed ideas on dissemination. Participatory and creative methods were used all along. The skills and experience they have acquired will be used in other projects in Colombia in the future.

To convey what happened to you or to tell a life story implies risks and can even be life-threatening. “When my narrator chose her pseudonym, she felt comfortable and talked more fluently...,” commented a life story interviewer. In order to protect the people involved, the project maintained a very low profile during the collection of stories. Real names were not used and even other names and places were changed or taken out if that information could identify the narrator. A support group among various members of the international and diplomatic community was also created as a protection mechanism, in order to enable the displaced to tell the truth of what happened to them and to have their voices heard. The search for truth implies serious security risks as it is still extremely dangerous to talk freely in Colombia today. This has been and is still a challenge for several of the interviewers and narrators. However, despite these significant challenges, the project found that there was both a need and an enormous desire to share stories. “We own our story and it’s a terrible thing that no one knows about it,” commented one participant. Carlos, one of the narrators, stated in his life story: “Above all I want the truth to be known of what it was that happened, of why we were displaced, of what was really behind it all.” As this book is published and all stories disclosed, continued strong support from the international and diplomatic community is necessary in order to protect all those involved in this project. The displaced as narrators could grasp the fact that the more we work consciously on our own biographies and develop a capacity to understand them, the more we will understand other people’s life stories and that will enable us to

build new bridges towards them and towards the future. We become aware of how much we owe to others and a feeling of gratitude may arise, particularly at times when we were faced with death and were rescued at the last moment.

Trust was created, hearts were opened and people started to talk. Most of them said that they felt relieved afterwards. One narrator used the expression “to suffer in silence” many times throughout the interview, to refer to her losses, concerns for the future, worries about her children and her husband. The interviewer got the impression that she didn’t talk much to other people and so she took advantage of her interview and valued the opportunity to express herself and to be listened to without being judged. “Having the opportunity to tell your life story can be therapeutic; it can be a restoring and empowering experience,” said one life story interviewer.

A fruitful collaboration developed among the interviewers and an atmosphere of trust, openness and respect for each others’ views and comments contributed to it being an exciting and lively project full of rich discussion and valuable contributions from all interviewers. Several of the displaced persons within the project shared a deep understanding of the less tangible impacts of displacement, issues which would probably not have been brought up in discussion without them. There was an impressive amount of experience, knowledge and commitment amongst all participants in this project. Many of them provided thoughtful comments, critiques and challenging questions throughout the whole project, others had to overcome a lot to do the interviews: “I felt nervous at the beginning, premature and new-born, but my narrator was prepared and experienced, which was good. He told me, ‘don’t feel so small... everyone has their own life and their own words.’ My narrator didn’t want to put himself above other people.”

These life stories are personal, unique, direct and vivid; they challenge generalisations and clichés regarding displacement and its consequences. Through this project the voices of the displaced, who are not normally listened to, have been heard, recorded on tape, transcribed word by word, read by a reading committee, selected, and then carefully and respectfully edited in order not to change the atmosphere and personal touch. (See “The voice of the Editor”).

It is evident that in Colombia, as elsewhere, the displaced population are not consulted prior to their displacement. Nobody asks them about their opinions nor invites them to participate in any decisions regarding their own future. To survive, you just flee, without asking any questions. Nobody is interested in what you think and what you have to say. You become a victim when

you lose control of your life and your rights are violated. All of this we know. But these life stories are not about passive victims – they are about people with inner strength, with a strong will to survive and regain control of their lives who continue to show an enormous amount of courage in standing up for their rights. This life story project restores a certain level of dignity to those affected by letting them speak out from the heart, to be listened to without being judged and to let the world know what has happened to them.

To complement the life stories and to set them in a Colombian context, the epilogue of this book has been written by Alfredo Molano, a famous Colombian sociologist and writer with years of experience in oral testimonies and of writing the history of ordinary people. With a stroke of his pen, he has drawn a complex picture of the various reasons and forces behind internal displacement in Colombia.

It is our hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of the causes and effects of internal displacement for civilians. It is aimed at the hearts and minds of decision-takers, politicians, planners and policy-makers in order that they may fully appreciate the complex and varied impacts of internal displacement and identify new ways to protect those affected.

You can also read and listen to these stories on an especially dedicated website: [www.idpvoices.org](http://www.idpvoices.org)

**ANNE-SOPHIE LOIS**

*Director of the Life Stories Project  
Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)*



**ANDREA VILLAREAL**

Psychologist, 30 years old

*“I work with the displaced population through the Norwegian Refugee Council and every day I see an ignored drama, a drama that continually grows, generating serious consequences for the society of a country that I love and I feel is becoming weaker with the human pain of the war. I agreed to participate in this project because every story in this book is evidence of the magnitude of that reality.”*

**ARMANDO AYSHIDORA**

Indigenous from the Barí People in Catatumbo (Norte de Santander), 25 years old

*“I am Secretary General and a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of the Motilón Barí Community of Colombia (Asocbarí). I participated in this project to continue the process of building and learning from the life history of my people and to portray and emphasize the current problems of the Barí People for the international community.”*

**EDITH ARISTIZÁBAL**

Psychologist and Psychoanalyst, 39 years old

*“As a researcher in the Aviadge group, I’ve worked for more than eight years with communities hurt by violence in the Caribbean region. I wanted to get involved in this project because I grew up in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and lived, in the bosom of my family, with the consequences of the armed conflict that has afflicted our region and forced us to abandon our land.”*

**ISMAEL MAESTRE**

Leader of the displaced population, 48 years old

*“I’m originally from Aracataca (Magdalena). I myself have suffered the hardships of the war, with five internal displacements in my own country. My organization is called Asociación Nacional de Desplazados de Colombia (National Association of Displaced People of Colombia). I participated in this project so that the displacement in Colombia can be seen abroad from the point of view of the protagonists themselves; in other words, from the point of view of the displaced themselves who have suffered this calamity.”*

**JENNY MUÑOZ**

Psychologist, 25 years old

*“I’ve been committed (to this cause) for several years, through my direct work with communities affected by violence and especially suffering the*

*effects of displacement. I work with the Norwegian Refugee Council, and I hope that this project contributes to satisfy our need, as the affected, to be heard”.*

### **JOHN JAIRO MENA**

*Afro-descendant peasant farmer, 37 years old*

*“I belong to the organization of Cavida – Community of Self-Determination, Life and Dignity of Cacarica –in Chocó. Tens years ago, I endured the hardships of the armed conflict and displacement. I decided to participate in the project because I think it’s important to disseminate the situation in which the mestizo (mixed), afro-descendant and Indian peasant farmer communities live, and also to help my community.” .*

### **LINA CECILIA PEÑA**

*Social worker, 33 years old*

*“Since 1999, I’ve worked in the psycho-social accompaniment of communities, families and people in situations of displacement. The barbarity of the war cannot remain hidden; there are thousands of people who suffer in Colombia. I participated in this project because I’m motivated (by the hope) that this publication will leave traces in you who encounter it, in you who encounter us, so that the voices of men and women touch your hearts.”*

### **MELISSA BALLESTEROS**

*Lawyer, 26 years old*

*“I decided four years ago to practice my profession serving communities through the Corporación Colectivo de Abogados Luis Carlos Pérez (Collective Corporation of Lawyers Luis Carlos Pérez) a regional organization in defence of human rights. I’ve participated in the project to support displaced people and the Bari People and help make their situation known.”*

### **MELKIN ROMAÑA**

*Afro-descendant teacher, 22 years old*

*“I come from the municipality of Carmen del Darién (Chocó) in the Jiguamiandó river basin. “I’ve been living with displaced people for nine years, and I’m displaced myself. I’ve been motivated to participate in this project by my interest in the stories of people from the communities who suffer because of displacement and because I want their stories to be known at the international and national level.”*

In the silence of their reading, these life stories are voices that echo within. And that was the essence of the editing process to which these texts were subjected: they are not my voice, they are their voices.

After an initial selection – by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) – of 25 of the 54 collected interviews, the interviews were reduced to 19 which delineate the panorama of displacement through which millions of Colombians pass today.

Convinced that the voices that narrate these stories would be irreparably distorted, I tried to listen to them with attention and respect to preserve the pain, the nostalgia, the despair and the hope they brought. And through them, the individuality, colour and textures of local ways of speaking – peasant farmer and Indian – of this country, so diverse culturally and still with regions that are isolated in geographic and human terms.

To achieve that, the particular grammar and local idiom was left intact and only those themes were eliminated which – though valuable – deviated from the central interest of the publication; only those words which did not contribute either information, or rhythm or colour to the narration.

The footnotes were included to avoid obstacles or detours for the reader-listener and the glossary, to amplify the significance of terms repeated throughout the book, conserving a blank space to give room to the design.

The subtitles are a guide for the reader looking for a particular theme within the story. Fragments were used from the text itself so that the column would be another narration made in parallel by the voice itself.

The manual of particular style was created in the following manner: the italic or cursive letters were reserved for words from other languages, for nicknames or aliases and to name parcels of land, farms or military operations; the square parentheses, for words added in the edition to permit a reading without misunderstanding; the dashes, for the narrator's explanations; the double quotation marks, for textual quotations and dialogue.

Throughout the process, I tried to materialize in the text, the soul of the narrator through his way of recounting, his rhythm, his pet expressions, his repetitions, his hesitations, and his verbal tangles, and recover for the reader his fears, obsessions, terror, loneliness, interminable pain...

Hopefully, I have achieved it and hopefully, upon reading these voices and letting these texts speak, there will emerge from you – as from me – a tear.

**MAGDALENA ARANGO**

*Editor*

**A**

*Acción Social:* Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional (Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation), created in 2006 to replace the Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network). Government entity entrusted with coordinating assistance to the displaced population, to the poor, and to victims of violence.

*Acuerdo de Santa Fe de Ralito (Santa Fe de Ralito Pact):* pact signed July 15, 2003 between the government and nine paramilitary commanders on the concentration, demobilization and reincorporation to civilian life of paramilitary members, and the beginning of the negotiation phase with the government.

*Alto Comisionado para la Paz (High Commissioner for Peace):* adviser to the president of the Republic on the structuring and development of peace policies; among his responsibilities are directing dialogues and signing agreements with spokespeople and representatives of illegal armed groups. Since 2001, the High Commissioner has been the psychiatrist Luis Carlos Restrepo.

*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia):* paramilitary group created in April 1997, which unites the majority of regional national paramilitary groups.

**C**

*Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (National Commission of Reparation and Reconciliation):* mixed body created by article 51 of Law 975 of 2005 – called the ley de Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace Law) – and article 21 of decree 4760 of 2005, to follow up on the processes of reincorporation and the work of local and national authorities, guarantee the full demobilization of the illegal armed groups and evaluate the reparation and restitution of the victims.

**D**

*Defensoría del Pueblo (Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman):* institution of the Colombian state responsible for boosting the effectiveness of human rights measures through the following integrated actions: promotion and dissemination of human rights issues; defence and protection of human rights, and dissemination and promotion of international humanitarian law.

*Demobilization and negotiation process with paramilitary groups:* refers to the process initiated in December 2002 by the government and the paramilitaries for the paramilitaries' reincorporation into civilian life. Also to events related

to the demobilization of AUC military structures, initiated in November 2003 after the signing of the Pact of Santa Fe de Ralito.

## E

**ELN:** Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army): guerrilla group of Guevarista (inspired by Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, or “Che” Guevara) origin, created in 1964. The second largest guerrilla movement in the country. Began dialogues towards a negotiation with the Uribe government in 2005.

**EPL:** Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Liberation Army), guerrilla group of Maoist orientation. Created in 1965 and mostly demobilized in February 1991. After the demobilization, was transformed into a political movement Esperanza, Paz y Libertad (Hope, Peace and Liberty). A dissident faction commanded by Francisco Caraballo – jailed since 1993 – is still active in some areas of the country.

## F

**FARC-EP:** Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-Army of the People), guerrilla group of Marxist-Leninist origin which emerged in 1964. The largest guerrilla group of the country.

**Fiscalía General de la Nación** (known in English as either the *Prosecutor General’s Office* or the *Attorney General’s Office*): entity of the judicial branch responsible for investigating crimes, defining cases, and accusing supposed offenders of the criminal law before judges and competent courts, either as a result of its own initiative or because of a formal complaint by a third party.

## L

**Ley 387 de 1997** (Law 387 of 1997): “by which measures are adopted for the prevention of forced displacement; (and for) the assistance, protection, consolidation, socio-economic stabilization of people internally displaced by violence in the Republic of Colombia.”

**Ley de Justicia y Paz: Ley 975 de 2005** (Justice and Peace Law: Law 975 of 2005), “by which regulations are decreed for the reincorporation of members of illegal, organized armed groups, which contribute in an effective manner to the attainment of national peace and by which other regulations are established concerning humanitarian agreements.”

## M

**M-19:** Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19, Movement of April 19), guerrilla group founded in 1974 and originating in Anapo (Alianza Nacional Popular) (National Popular Alliance), a populist

party. Demobilized in 1990 and converted into the Alianza Democrática M-19 (Democratic Alliance M-19), a leftist political movement, which no longer exists.

## P

*Paramilitaries, paras, paracos*: members of an irregular armed force that benefits from the omission, acquiescence, or tolerance of the state security forces. Formally organized in 1997 as the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) (AUC). Began a process of negotiation with the Uribe government in 2002.

*Personería (Office of the People's Defender)*: state entity entrusted with protecting and promoting human rights, defending the public interest, and overseeing the official conduct of public servants.

*Plan Patriota (Patriot Plan)*: the biggest and most sophisticated military operation of the Colombian Armed Forces in recent history, carried out principally in the departments of Meta, Caquetá, Guaviare and Vichada and initiated in January 2004. Though the information is held in reserve, it is known to cover a territory of some 300.000 km<sup>2</sup> with 15.000-17.000 soldiers deployed.

*Política de seguridad democrática (Democratic Security Policy)*: policy of the governments of Álvaro Uribe Vélez [2002-2006 and 2006-2010], based on the recuperation of territory by state security forces through an increase in troop numbers and the involvement in the counter-insurgent fight of civil society, using a network of informants and peasant-farmer soldiers.

## R

*Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network)*: government entity entrusted with the coordination of the policy of assistance to the displaced population. Was replaced in 2006 by the Agencia Presidencial para la Acción Social y la Cooperación Internacional (Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation), (Acción Social).

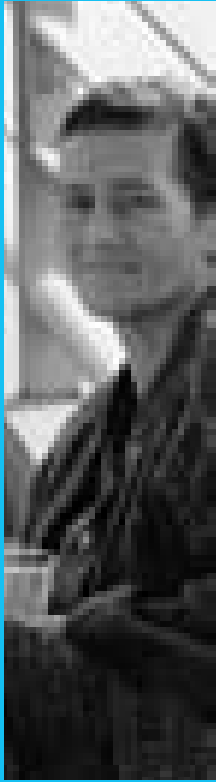
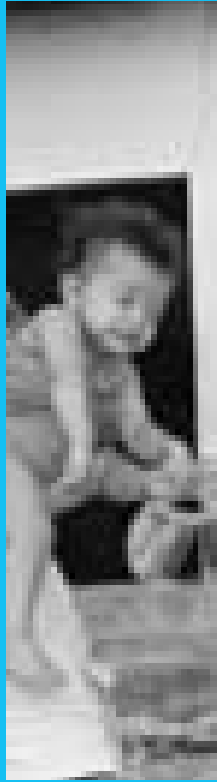
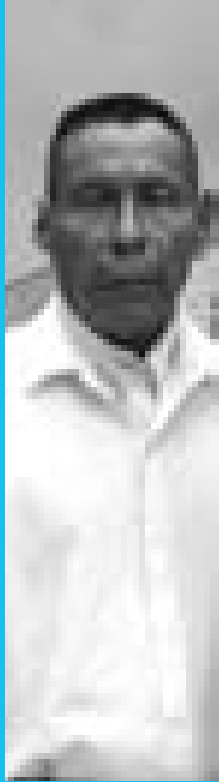
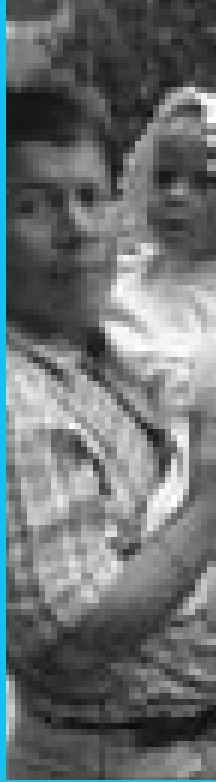
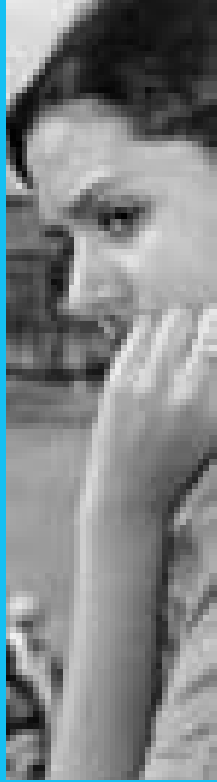
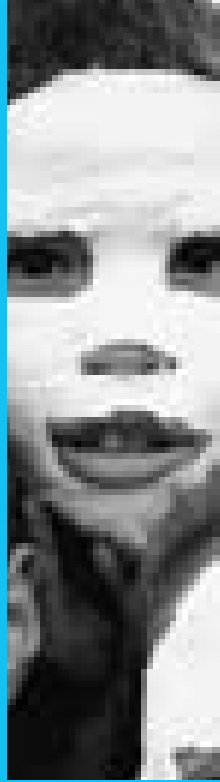
## S

*SISBÉN*: Sistema de Selección de Beneficiarios para Programas Sociales (System of Selection of Beneficiaries of Social Programs). Sometimes used as a synonym of the régimen subsidiado de salud (subsidized health regimen), one of the basic programs of assistance to the most vulnerable sectors of the population, classified in levels 1 and 2 of SISBÉN.

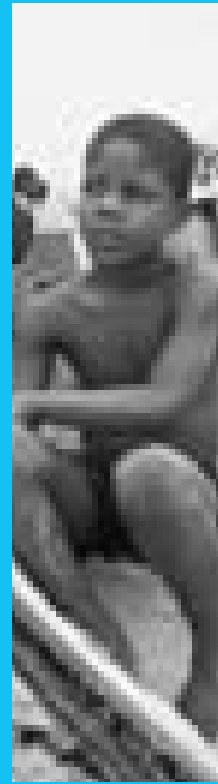
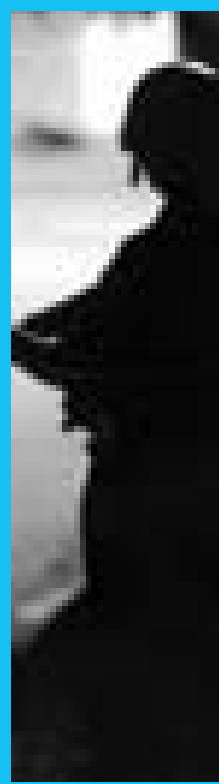
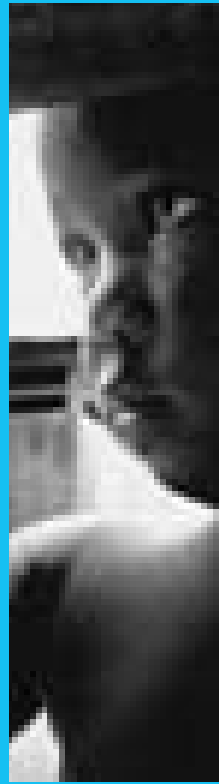
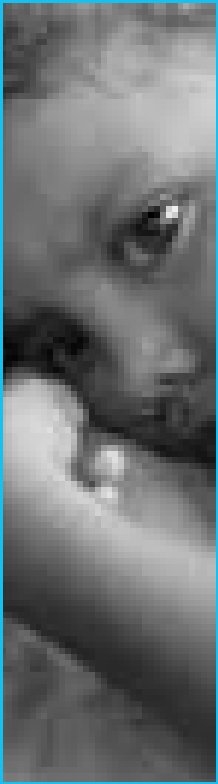
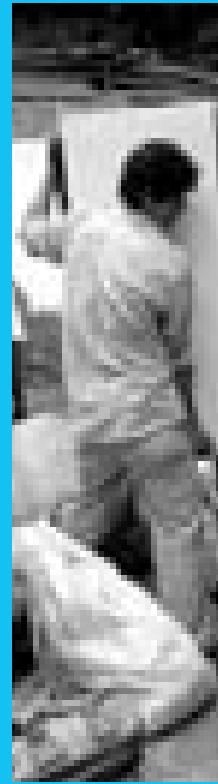
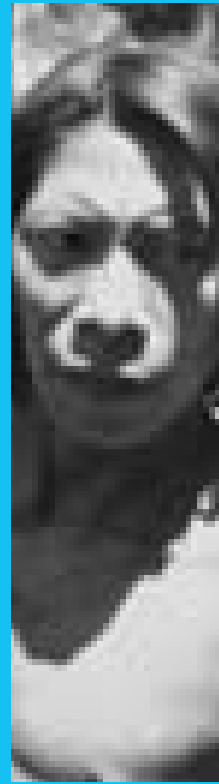
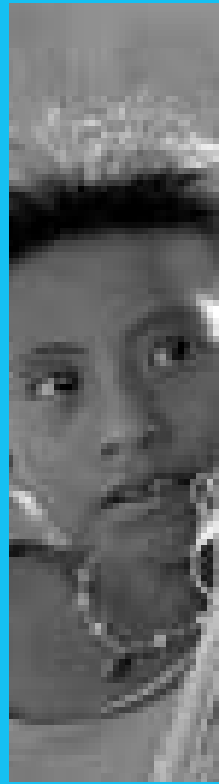
## U

*Unión Patriótica*: political party that emerged in 1984 from the agreements between the government of Betancur [1982-1986] and the FARC in the search for a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict. More than 3000 activists of the party have been assassinated, among them two presidential candidates and nine members of congress.

LIFE STORIES







NORTE DE SANTANDER









## Mileinis\*

### AGE

15 years old.

### DETAILS

Forcibly displaced from La Gabarra (Norte de Santander) to Los Santos and Lebrija (Santander). Was the victim of a land mine.

I was born in La Gabarra, Catatumbo on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1991. My birth was registered in Tibú, and I'm now 15. I live with my mother and my three brothers: The oldest is 18, then comes my sister who is 16, then me, and then my brother, who is 13 there's nobody else.

What I remember from La Gabarra is that when we were playing and my mother was selling refrigerators, my mother was told that we had to leave town because she had been accused of being a guerrilla commander's lover, or something like that, I don't remember... My mother finished selling the refrigerators and we got ready and my mother said: "trust in God that, if we wake alive, we will leave tomorrow!" So we got everything ready, we put lots of underwear in a bag. But the bag was left behind on top of the stereo.

We arrived in Cúcuta and then went to Santos in Santander where my *nono*<sup>1</sup> lives; my mother went to speak to the mayor there, so he would help us. She told him we were displaced. Then my grandfather gave us a room. That is what I remember from when I was 8 or 9 years old. From there, ahead!

I played...Of my mom, I remember that when I had a baby bottle, I was always playing with it and sucking on it. One day she hit me because I was playing in the dirt, because by playing

in the dirt I would end up covered with flies. So, my mom threw away my bottle.

My uncle Juan was the uncle I most loved, but he died. I was around seven. I always think of him. I remember that one day when we were going with my mom to pick up some milk, he hid and then jumped up behind us like a frog, scaring us. He was my mom's nicest brother and our most loved uncle. When uncle Juan was little, he fell from the cradle and hit his head. So he would get seizures. One day he had a seizure and fell face first and drowned.

I remember that when the guerrillas arrived, they showed my sister and me how to use pistols and that my sister cried because they wouldn't let her fire one. They told us that when we were grown up, when we were around 14 years old, they would take us with them. That's what my mom said too. Meanwhile, we spent time with a young guerrilla woman who showed us how to load the pistol and that kind of stuff.

In 1999, the area corresponding to Kilometre 60 of the hamlet of La Gabarra was like a big town, almost empty; at that hour, there was almost nobody around, everybody was already at home, *raspando*<sup>2</sup> or on their farms...We lived at Kilometre 60, and it was vacant; it was no more than around one to three blocks long and one wide, and beyond that was pure *monte*<sup>3</sup>.

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 Grandfather. 2 Collecting coca leaves. 3 Countryside.

I was in fifth grade when a professor named Pablo arrived. I liked that professor so much! He was very cool, not like the lady professor, who scolded you all the time and was so embittered! I did my homework. But when it was time for exams, even though I studied, I couldn't keep anything in my head. So my sister and I helped each other, for my sister and I were the only two students in fifth grade: the rest were all in first, second or fourth grade.

I liked to play football and I was even in a women's championship. When I would break for recess, I always brought a ball and when that was damaged, I would go and buy myself another so I could play football with the boys. In the afternoon, when it was time to practice, I would always play with them, everyday.

On Sundays, I would go to the market plaza and a guy would give me bones and meat for my mother to make a stew. Then she would make stew or *rellenas*<sup>4</sup>.

My brother didn't let us talk much to boys, because he would say "you're going to end up being their girlfriend and then what's going to happen if you end up pregnant. If, with all we're suffering, you end up pregnant? So he would scold

us and we, seething, would answer him in foul language. My mother would hit us: "if he's taking care of you, be thankful that you have a brother that takes care of you and doesn't sell you, there are other brothers that...hmm!!" My mother told me that one of her brother's sold...not that he sold...but that he would tell my aunts: "go hook up with that guy..." and that he would get money to try to convince her; but my brother, no. Instead, my brother would tell us: "don't talk to anyone, be alert..."

So my mother would hit us. I would get mad, and when I calmed down, I would say to her: "it's better that you hit me, mom; if not I might be a bum on the street, with my own kids about." She taught me many things: to cook, wash clothes, do household chores and respect myself as a women, also to make myself be respected by men.

I remember that there was this Señor Pablo, who spent everything he earned smoking marijuana. My mom rented him a room. I remember that I was picking up some *potes*<sup>5</sup> when I heard a shot; I didn't think it was a shot: "somebody has fallen down the stairs," I said. And when I went out and saw people gathered in front of the house.. when I looked, there was Pablo, he looked at me and when I looked back at him, he keeled over. I said: "what's happened?" and they began to talk about how some motorcycles had arrived, about how the people on the bikes had called to him, one of them greeted him, and the other, on the other bike, killed him and fled. Some people put him in a truck and they carried him away. Who knows what they did to him!



*We only brought our clothes*

I said “My God! Why did they kill Pablo? He was so good to us! People would pass by selling things – lets say ice cream and *bonyures*<sup>6</sup> – and he would buy it for us and my mom would say: “one for everyone to share” and he would say “no, one for each person.” He was so great to us! He always gave us advice. When all that happened, I was at a neighbour’s house with a friend, playing, and my mom was talking to different men. I didn’t even pay attention to them, I just played. Then my mom told us “let’s go to sleep because tomorrow we’re leaving.” She didn’t say anything else.

Of my father, I remember that when we were going to come – my mother told him to give us money for the fare, for something to eat, and that he didn’t give us anything and just stayed where he was, because he has practically the rich guy there, the guy who sells gasoline. My mom reported<sup>7</sup> him and he sent us 100,000 pesos and since then we haven’t had any word of him. I was around 9 or 10 years old, I can’t remember exactly.

It happened fast: at around 5 we got up.. to wash and leave. We left everything behind .. We said: “Mom but why? Nothing is happening! And my mom said: “Because I’ve been told that they’re going house to house killing family by family and that we should leave before they killed us; so I’d rather leave before they kill me, because you are too little to stay here by yourself.”

When we were leaving our hamlet near La Gabarra, I saw the dead. My God!, *soplaos*<sup>8</sup>: the fat ones were tall and they *olia más a picho*<sup>9</sup> I said: “Mom, give away everything, give away the farm and let’s never come back here,” and my mom would look at me and not say a word.

Since they said that everyone, everyone was in military uniform back there, you didn’t know who was doing the killings, I don’t know! I know that one day we went to bed and the next day there were men in uniform everywhere, but I didn’t pay attention, I acted as if nothing had happened. As if this were normal. But when the massacre happened, I became terrified of them, and I am scared of them now.

We paid for a lift in a car and we arrived in La Gabarra. There we caught a bus for Tibú and Cúcuta. My mom looked for a bus to Bucaramanga and we arrived in Piedecuesta and then caught a bus to Los Santos. From there we went to my grandfather’s house. When we arrived at my grandfather’s it was election time. My mom was rooting for one candidate for mayor and my uncle for another; when my uncle came home and my mom said her candidate was winning – my mom was peeling yucca – my uncle bashed her over the head with a plate – one of those aluminium plates – and threw a metal chair at her, breaking her arm. I tagged along with my mom when she went to the mayor’s office to denounce what had happened, and then my mom went to get her arm fixed. Then they arrested my uncle and took him away. My grandfather said: “go and withdraw the complaint against Mauricio, or get out of the house now!” and my mom said “take it easy, dad, I’ll leave tomorrow in the morning.” And that’s how it was, but she didn’t withdraw the complaint!

Then we travelled to my aunt’s house at Lebrija beyond Los Santos. My aunt welcomed us in, but some of her daughters were terrible. They told us: “Go to El Partnón and my mom said: “but what’s that.” So my mom asked some woman and the woman said “El Partenón is where women go to sell themselves,” and my mom said “I might just have to.”

My mom didn’t give up; she talked to the president of the Community Action Committee<sup>10</sup> and the committee found us a farm to stay on. We went there, while my aunt stayed behind with her girls. The farm was where the paramilitaries killed people and buried them: One day I was with my dog, looking for a place to go to the bathroom, when I saw a bone in a pile of dirt, this bone, and ignored it. Then the air filled with a rotten smell...my mom said to some guy “but it smells like something rotten over there” and he said: “of course, a few days ago they killed some guy and buried him.” So I said “Ugh, that’s the bone I saw!” We were really nervous.. imagine the dead rising up and coming for us!

4 Blood sausage. 5 Tins. 6 Commercial brand of yogurt, BonYurt. 7 For the food allowance of the children. 8 Bloated. 9 Stank. 10 Junta de Acción Comunal.

My God, how nervous we were! One day we were coming home in the evening when my mom said: "It smells like goat!" For us, when it smells like goat, it's because the devil's around. So she said: "bow down and pray!" We bowed down and prayed, super nervous and the leaves swayed ... until we finished praying and everything stilled. We slept until the next day. But we couldn't bear to be there anymore and we rented some rooms in another place, and we worked and we worked to save enough money to buy a house in the El Paraíso neighbourhood of Lebrija.

#### *We all worked to buy ourselves a house*

My sister was about 9 years old and we were all working to buy ourselves a house. My mom was working at some woman's house preparing chickens for sale; I sold raffle and lottery tickets and worked in a marketplace so they would give me food. So did my little sister and my little brother. The oldest brother shined shoes. With all that work, we saved, bought ourselves a house and lived there. When we grew up, men would say to us: "Don't sell raffle or lottery tickets, sell your body: you're too good looking to be doing what you're doing. So we told my mom, and my brother overheard us and said: "mom, don't send the girls out selling anymore; I'll work and buy whatever you need."

One December, my brother made \$100,000 pesos shining shoes and gave us money for *el estreno*<sup>11</sup> That was it for lottery tickets. It was now the boys and my mom who sold lottery tickets while we stayed at home studying. My brother would say: "Everything for the girls!" He bought hardly anything for himself. And if he bought one set of clothes for himself, he bought two for each us. So whenever I get into a fight with my brother now, I tell myself: "calm down, he has been like a father to us;" He was the oldest one; He supported us and defended us in everything.

In 2004, the president of the Republic announced that: "anyone with farms in La Gabbarra should return because everything is okay

there now." My mom said to us "come everyone, they're saying everything's okay, let's go" and we said "yes, yes!." So we bought tickets, packed, and left as if we were going on vacation – it was July. Everything was abandoned, but when we arrived people seemed as happy as if we had been raised from the dead. The church was like a pig sty.

People helped us with food and shelter. We went to visit Ezequiel, a chubby man who gave us a place to stay and food while they cleared the current occupant out of our house. But my mom felt bad about making him move out because we had been gone so long... so instead we went to stay at a place near the police station and jail.

But there they told us that a woman would emerge from the jail crying tears of blood and begging for water. We asked "why?," And they told us that "when the paras left the woman in there, they gave her neither food nor water, so she now walks out of the jail with that glass in her hand." That scared us. So, in the end, the man living in our house moved out quickly and we went back to live there again.

People gave us everything – pots, spoons. One day the paramilitary commander gave us mattresses, lots of food, and clothes. The paras told my mother: "As long as you're not mixed up in anything, stay." Then two guys in uniform arrived and said something to my mom like: "see? The house is falling apart; marry the *mona*<sup>12</sup> to Palillo (Toothpick) or something like that, and have the dark-haired one marry me. Then we will fix up the house for you. But my mother said: "No I'd rather the house come tumbling down. I won't marry off my daughters. If they get married, it will be because they want to get married, not because they're forced." My mom said: "don't talk to them anymore."

After everyone gave us all that stuff, we went back to living in the house. It was uncomfortable but it was our own and we set about fixing it up. My mom arrived and what was still salvageable, she fixed and what wasn't, like the walls that were ready to come tumbling down, she knocked down and put boards up so no one could get into



the house. It didn't matter that it was half destroyed. It was our house, and we could do what we wanted there, and it was big.

*“Mines? No, that's too much!”*

One day we were studying, the army had arrived, the others had disappeared, and I heard a commotion outside... When I walked out of the house, I saw a soldier that was missing a foot. Someone said: “the soldier stepped on a mine in the school,” My God! When I looked, there was another soldier having lunch. I remember he had said I'm hungry...! I'm going to eat.” Then a third soldier arrived and with his gun swept the guy's lunch to the ground “get rid of your lunch! can't you see that your companion has had an accident? “Your lunch is more important? And so the guy abandoned his lunch and went to help the wounded soldier.

When we would go play at the pitch next to the school, we would only use half of it; you couldn't play on the other half because there were mines there and it was fenced off with sticks. That's the way it happened: we would be playing, like normal, and the army watching that nobody crossed to the other side of the field. They would say: Uy, so strange! Mines? Up to that time, everyone knew people were killed, assassinated around there. But mines? People began to say to each other: Mines? No, that's screwed up!

Then our professor said to us one day: “okay, I want kids in the fifth grade to do me the favour of finding out what the name of the president of Colombia is, his first name and last name, and that of the vice president, and the governor of Norte de Santander. We were clueless. That was on May 9, 2005. It was a Monday, a holiday. We asked a soldier, but he only knew the name of Colombia's president – Uribe – and nothing more. So we asked ourselves: “Now what do we do?” We went home and said: “Mom, we have to go to the soldiers' barracks to do research for our homework,” and she said “Okay” – at that time my mother called me “Dark one” – “Dark one,

take some home-raised eggs with you and sell them so we can buy some food for supper.”

We were walking along when I said “I'm going to leave some eggs here with the president of the municipal council.” and then go to La Garra. I was walking with my brother and when we were near the house, and I said “it's going to get dark soon, I'm going to take the eggs.” My brother waited for me in the house. Then along came Jhonny, a man with a pickup truck who was said to be a guerrilla fighter, I don't know, but I had always ridden with him as if it was no big deal. We drove along and I said: “Jhonny, stop here, I have to get out, I have to take the eggs and sell them or my mom will scold me because I didn't sell them” and he said “don't get out Mileinis, don't get out, something will happen to you.” “but what's going to happen to me? Nothing's going to happen.” And he said: “don't get out because it's going to be your mom who sorrows, you're mom who suffers. No, do not get out!” But I said: “Stop or I'll scream” Then he said: “Okay, but remember, I told you.” Then I got out and he drove off. I stood there thinking “but what could happen to me?” I grabbed the basket of eggs and was looking for a place to go to the bathroom when I heard a car. I crossed over into a *trocha*<sup>13</sup> by the side of the road, climbed over the separating wires, put the eggs to one side and .. squatted down to urinate. When the car had passed, I pulled my underwear up and, on, turning around, Uf, an explosion! “what had happened Was this a dream?” I looked at myself and I'm wounded, I touch my face and it's bloody, and I say to myself “Oh, my feet.” I remembered the soldier who had stepped on a mine and lost his foot and when I looked down... I saw that I was missing the toes on my right foot. I was in the hole, all rigid, and I didn't feel anything...

I said to myself “this is nothing but a dream.” I looked at the foot that was missing its toes and then I looked at the eggs – I wasn't afraid or anything – and I began to laugh because not a single egg had cracked. And that was the funniest thing for me. I said to myself “uf, how's

that? and I remember that when I climbed over the wire again, I began to feel weird. I started to walk, to walk normally... I didn't feel anything, like when your foot's asleep, it's like somebody could stab you there and you wouldn't feel anything.

It didn't hurt or anything. I prayed, saying: "Uncle Juan, please, don't let me die, look I'm still young, I want to know how my future will be, how my children will be, my husband." That's how I began, how I prayed to my beautiful Virgin and to my God. I prayed rapidly and, at the same time, I laughed; I prayed and I laughed; I didn't feel anything, I prayed and then I shouted: "help, help me please, I don't want to die!" Then a guy appeared in front of me and said: "child, what's happened to you! I heard a noise like a bomb and then 'help'!..." "Look, it's that I stepped on a mine and I don't want to die, I want to live." He walked around and around me. When he bent down and looked at my foot he said "what's happening to you? Ay! I don't want to end up covered in blood, you're spilling lots of blood and I don't want to be covered in blood, look how dirty you are. Ay, no! What should I do?" Well, take me to the hospital" "But don't you see that you will soak with me blood...? So I said: "Go down to where the president of the council is – which was around two blocks away – and tell him to call my mom, that I don't want to die."

I had on sneakers and socks. So while he was gone, I took off the sneaker and the piece of sock that was left on my right foot and threw them to the side. To get rid of the piece of sock, I had to pull off the piece of skin which remained from my toes: I closed my eyes, and I pulled off the skin, not feeling any pain, and then I took off the piece of sock and threw it away... When a car came, I stood up and I had a red scarf and I was laughing and calling out for the car to stop, when I saw that it was my mother. "What happened to you? When she saw my foot and how dirty I was, she started talking and talking to me and I said "mom, why are you talking? mom, you have a different voice" and she said: "What happened to you? Why are you here? So I explained everything to her.

### *My child, they're going to amputate your leg*

We arrived at the infirmary, and she was in a rush, very worried. I walked to a cot and lay down. They were talking: "Who here is a family member?" and some lady laid out there, laid out like a dog. My God! The tears flowed and I said "God, why is my mother like that? Why are my brothers and sisters waiting outside? I could hear a crowd of people who had gathered around to see this girl.

I think my uncle Juan helped me so it wouldn't hurt or anything. They put alcohol on my foot and began to wrap a bandage around it. My foot looked like a basket ball with all that cotton surrounding it. I needed injections that cost \$150,000 pesos each and we didn't have any money, so I said to my mom: "mom, tell Manuel to help me, he has money that can help" and my mom went and Manuel bought me three more injections. But they wouldn't let me leave, so I said to myself: "I'm going to say that my leg hurts so they let me go soon, because I don't want everybody to be looking at me and begin to say 'Oh, what a shame, look what...!' So I began to scream: "Ay, help me! My leg hurts, it hurts..."

Jhonny arrived when they put me in the ambulance. "Why don't they transport the girl out of the town? asked Jhonny. "Because there's no gasoline," the doctor responded. So Jhonny swore: "ay! I'll pay for this I-don't-know-what (dam) gasoline, but get going fast with the girl." That's what Jhonny said. So finally they said: "okay, let's go because the guy will pay the gasoline."

When we arrived at the hospital in Cúcuta, the doctors began to talk to my mom and they began to take off my clothes, telling me: "Mileinis, we're going to take your clothes off because we have to operate on you." "Everything but my scarf, the scarf," I told them – "keep the scarf for me, don't throw my scarf away...!" Ah! because that scarf I have as a keepsake. So my mom didn't throw the scarf away; but they threw everything else away.

Then my mom said: "my child, they are going to amputate your leg," I said "yes, mom."

Then when my mom had gone, I lifted up my head a little and like thirty doctors were there looking at my foot and they began to say: “we’ll have to start from here,” “no, from here”; They all began to put their hands on my leg where they thought the cut should be. So I said to myself: “Why so many doctors? It was only my foot. Why so many?” I was talking to myself like that, when a nurse came and gave me an injection and soon I was asleep. When I awoke, there was a nurse in the room and I said: doctor, have they already taken off all that cotton that I had on?” and she said: “We’ve already amputated you.” I couldn’t even begin to move a little because my leg started to hurt. When I lifted up the *tendido*<sup>14</sup> and looked down, I said: “uf! doctor, come on, why did they take it off from so high up if the mine only took off half my foot.?” And she said: “Because you were wearing lycra and when the mine exploded it left gunpowder in the bone, so we had to amputate it here.” I felt incredibly sad and cried and said: “Ay, My God! But why so high up if the mine took off half my foot? But why? Then the nurse said: “where is the relative of the girl? She went and didn’t come back?” and so they left me outside on the cot. Then they took me to a room...

I could only think: “ay, My God! But why, now I can’t run, or play football, or do what I wanted to do and have a career for myself? Then it was six in the afternoon and my mom still hadn’t arrived. As soon as she arrived and I saw her, I began to cry. My mom cried too. I told her: “Mom, I thought you were going to leave me because I had this accident,” and my mom said: “No, don’t worry, I just had some errands to do.” When the doctors arrived, they asked me: “And what is this Mileinis, what was your career going to be” “I wanted to be a sergeant in the military, but after what happened, I can’t, because in the army everybody has to be totally healthy.” So they started to talk first to my mom and then to me. “yes of course Mileinis, you can have that career, you can.” I said “but no, because my cousin told me that to be in the military you had to be completely healthy and I don’t have a foot to run with and all that”

and a doctor said to me “you can” and I said “but no” and then “ay, fine. Let’s say I can” and that’s how it went.

Two days after the amputation, my mom arrived with a wheelchair with which to take me to the bathroom .. and when I got up and put my foot on the foot rest, I forgot that my foot had been amputated. When I had my foot on the foot rest, I started to feel this pain. My God! And my mom went running, calling for the nurse: “an injection, look she’s suffering with pain...” Uy! – I said – “but why didn’t I remember that I was missing a foot? Why?”

My mom stayed there with me, not eating anything. She didn’t buy herself lunch, because she didn’t even have 100 pesos. So since they gave me lunch, I said “mom, eat because I’m not hungry.” I ate like two spoonfuls and the rest I left for her. She said: “But, what’s this? And I said: “no, mom, I’m not hungry. You eat it.” I wanted to give it to her. Around three days later, my mom ran into a friend who had been our nursery school teacher when we were little. The woman said to my mom “if you want, go home and sleep and eat and wash your clothes.” So my mom told me “you stay here,” and a woman there said: “I’ll do the girl a favour, when she goes to the bathroom, I’ll get up and help her there.” Do you think I’m going to tell some woman to help me to the bathroom? No. So one night when I needed to go to the bathroom, I got up and there wasn’t a single nurse around – and nobody noticed – as I hopped little by little until I had reached the bathroom and then lay back down to sleep. I didn’t hop normally, but really slowly.

Four days later – on a Friday – they said: “it’s time now to take the child home, she’s out of danger and everything is fine.” So I got ready. I said: “Mom, look how disfigured my face is”. So my mom talked to the doctor and he said “Don’t worry, we gave the child some...” I don’t remember exactly what it is, but its like a spider web that when it grabs hold ends up sucking, eating and leaving blood behind. So my mom talked to the nurse and the nurse said: “If something happens

to the child, it won't be our responsibility because she will no longer be in the hospital." "How can that be?," my mother said, "If something happens to the child you don't assume any responsibility? I will appeal to the court." My mom went and talked to the Red Cross. Then the Red Cross gave my 200 hundred and something pills and eight injections and crutches and spoke with the hospital so that *me aguantaran*<sup>15</sup> there until Sunday.

#### *How bad is it too lose a foot?*

My godmother told us we could move in with her, that she would put us up. So they gave me my crutches. Then when my sister arrived from La Gabarra, bringing me a change of clothing, she saw me and began to cry. I started to cry as well and I told my mom: "Mom tell the Mona (the blond) not to cry, it makes me cry. Then my sister said she wouldn't come inside because she felt guilty about the accident. I said: "don't be silly, you didn't put the mine there, and you didn't know I was going to have an accident, not even I had any idea that I was going to step on this." Then she came towards me and I began to comb her hair so she wouldn't cry, and I said: "Come I'll do your hair and she showed me the clothes and the earrings that the doctors had sent me.

Then we went to my godmother's house and I stayed there. When my godmother's mother arrived, she said: "Don't let the girl out of the house because the guerrillas are looking for her, to kill her, and they'll kill everyone they find in the house." My mom said: "but why?" "because the guerrillas say the mine wasn't for her, but for the soldiers." "but anyone could put their foot on this mine and it would explode and how was I to know? How could I know?" "And they're also saying that you stepped on the mine because you got pregnant with one of the soldiers," "and if I was pregnant, I wouldn't have stepped on the mine, I would have been working to be able to support my child." They were saying that I had been split open, that my guts and my breasts had come out.

Then my mom said: "My God will punish all of those who are telling these pure lies." My godmother was afraid and she told us we had to leave because otherwise they would be killed... they who were guilty of nothing. My godmother's sister arrived and told us we could stay with her, that we wouldn't have to pay for anything, that she would pay for everything. So we went to her house. We had been there for around two months when she told us: "I'm going to sell the house, you'll have to leave," and we said "and where are we going to go? Where?"

Then my mom went and returned with my two brothers. My brothers looked at me and began to cry and I said: "stop being silly, don't cry. At least I'm alive! How bad is it to lose a foot? Anyone can lose one, it's no big deal. And I spoke like that: "Yea, How bad is it to lose a foot? It's no big deal for me to lose a foot." But when I was sad I would say: "ay, I know that I can't run or play or do anything else..!"

When neither my mom or anyone else was around, I would stay alone in my room and play some songs that reminded me of a friend. I would say to myself: "ay, My God! Where is my friend?," and I would start to cry. One time I remember saying to myself: "ay!, I know that I can't play or run, but thank God, I'll live to be a grandmother with crutches...How will my armpits be with these crutches?"

#### *With or without the prosthetic leg, i walk!*

What I was thinking was this: When I went to the Red Cross and they gave me a leg, it wasn't the same as before, but it was still a whole leg for walking. So I felt content and I didn't think about it anymore. Though I couldn't run or anything with the leg, I could walk; I could leave behind the crutches. Within three months, they had given me the prosthetic leg and I put it on and I was really happy. But I didn't know how to do it, so I mistreated the leg because I didn't have a clue how to put it on.

A woman phoned to tell me to go see the doctor who had made me the leg so he could teach me how to put it on, so he could explain it to me. And the doctor explained it well. I didn't take any shorts with me. So I had to take my pants off and walk around in underwear and I thought to myself "qué oso<sup>16</sup>! What will they think?" I felt really ashamed; my mother wasn't with me. Then I got up and walked normally as if nothing had happened to me and I grabbed a crucifix and said: "My God, help me, don't let anything happen to me," and I said to myself: "don't let anything happen to me, let me walk normally." And yes, I did walk normally. When my mother saw me, she was happy and said: "Look, how well the Dark One walks! and I said "ay, yes!" The doctor told me: "careful not to get it wet." He explained everything so that I wouldn't damage it and he said: "Walk for an hour at first and then walk a bit more each day, increase your walking by an hour."

Then the doctor said that I now knew how to put it on and that we could go. I went happily to Luisito's house so he could see my prosthetic leg and how well I could walk. When he saw me walking well and everything, I felt really proud and happy and began to walk everywhere in the neighbourhood and people said: "ay, Dark One! look how well you walk! and I would say "yea, thanks." Then I said to myself: "I'm tired of walking so much ..!" and I took my prosthetic leg off .. ay! I had forgotten that the doctor had told me not to walk for more than an hour, and I had walked more than that, I had been walking for four hours. My stump turned red and it hurt and it was two weeks before I put it back on.

Finally, I began to use my leg with a crutch. The priest would say to me: "Now get rid of that crutch, you can walk better without one!" and I would say "What if it hurts?" "Get rid of that crutch or I'll break it," the priest said. "okay, I'll get rid of it" and then, little by little, I stopped using it. Now, I feel embarrassed to get out onto the street with the crutch. I just go everywhere with the prosthetic leg. I've never fallen using it. With or without the leg, I walk!

In January, they were going to make me another leg, because I had outgrown mine and my stump had gotten thinner. They made me another one and I spent two and a half months in Bogotá with a hurting stump because the new leg didn't fit well, and it gripped my stump too tight. Then when everything was okay, I brought the old leg home as a souvenir. With the new one, I tried to run. But if I can run well, I don't run as well as another person who isn't missing anything. Still I try to run.

The doctors told me: "as you grow, we will change the leg, because otherwise your waist will end up twisted and you'll walk twisted. The Red Cross still follows my case, helping me. But then I joined a program called Semillas de Esperanza<sup>17</sup> (Seeds of Hope) that belongs to Cirec<sup>18</sup>, and they helped me with my leg situation. They told me that they would have to make three to five prosthetic legs for me. Like that which was made for me when I was 14 ... Yea, it was a year and three months ago when everything happened.

When a year had passed, I said: "My God. How I want to go back to La Gabarra and remember everything. If I cry, I'll cry, but I want to remember everything of that moment! My mom said no, because they speak really badly of you there, so I should just stay put. So a year and some months passed without event, and everything was normal. My sister also says: "when I'm 18, I'll return." I tell her that I will too. But I tell her I want to return with Mom. I'd be afraid to go alone, and with my mom I feel safe.

### *I'm not different, just the new Mileinis*

Just this July, while in Bogotá, I was invited on a trip. They take all the handicapped people on this trip so they will understand, that although handicapped, we can do a lot of things that other people can't do. I'd never been in a canoe, or in rapids or anything like that, and I learned.

There are doctors who've said to me that I'm not a different Mileinis, but a new one, since before I played football, and now I can't;

16 How embarrassing! 17 Rehabilitation program with community participation for survivors of anti-personnel mines. 18 Centro Integral de Rehabilitación de Colombia (The Integral Rehabilitation Centre of Colombia).

before I could jump up and down and now I can't. But before I had no idea how to dance and now I'm trying to dance. I've gotten to know many things: I've gotten to know almost the whole country that I didn't know before.

I now realize how many things I've done: for example, I've gotten to know people I didn't know before; I've been on a plane, which I hadn't done before – it was my dream; I got to know Bogotá, I saw it with my own eyes. I went, I put my only foot down there, but I got to know it and I'm having a great time. So now I say to my mom: "Ay, Mom thanks! It was good that I stepped on that mine. If I hadn't stepped on that mine, I wouldn't have had all the joy I have." Then she says to me "why?," "look, Mom, if I hadn't stepped on the mine, I wouldn't have gotten to know the Red Cross, or anything, nor would I have rode on an airplane, nor would I have gotten to know Bogotá; If I hadn't stepped on a mine I'd be in La Gabbarrá, working as usual. Instead, I stepped on the mine and I've done lots of things." On one hand, it seems great, because the government helps you a lot, but, on the other hand, it stinks: I can't run or jump or anything like that. I said: "what difference does it make? I can walk and I can act as if nothing ever happened; and it's more important to walk than run." But it's caused a lot of suffering and pain for my mother and for my siblings as well.

The months passed. Some doctors arrived, and a man who works for Semillas de Esperanza said to me: "Mileinis, in September a doctor will call you so you can go to Bogotá to meet some people there." When they called me, they wanted to talk to my Mom and my Mom said: "yes, tomorrow we have to be in Bogotá." We got on the plane. I never thought that I would get on a plane. When we arrived it was great. The doctor was waiting for us at the airport; they put us in a car, and then they took us to the office of the Vice President (of the Republic) where the Factor X<sup>19</sup> team was waiting to meet us. While we waited, they gave us juices to drink. Then the team arrived and they said: "Narda<sup>20</sup>" will be the godmother of Mileinis," and I went up to her and when she hug-

ged me, I began to shed tears. I didn't know what was happening to me. I cried from joy, and she said to me: "it's okay, now, now...it's over now!" Everyone from Factor X began to sing a song and they said: "tonight we are going to sing a song for you." They had told us that we were going to return the same day, so we didn't have any extra clothes and had to wear the same clothes. At nine in the evening they were singing, and they divided us up. Narda said that she would sing for Mileinis "a girl who stepped on a mine and was mutilated." I was happy, glad; I never thought something like this would happen to me.

The next day, we caught a plane and returned. When I arrived at home, everyone said: "But Mileinis? So now that you're famous you don't even say hi or anything? "so silly" – I told them – "what, just because you're famous, you can't still be normal?" Besides, I'm not famous; they just took me there. They wanted to help, that's all." Everyone always talks that way. "See, Mom? Everyone says that I've become cocky because of that."

#### *Now I really do feel happy*

My oldest brother says: "Mom, the Dark One has become worldly! Look, how much they've helped her because she stepped on that mine. I want to travel, get to know Bogotá, I want to do everything that she's done; but no, you need money. Look at how much they've helped her just because she stepped on that mine." And it was true, stepping on the mine was great, but at the same time, not. So I told them: "Would you like to step on a mine?" They said no: "Don't you see that I've lost a limb!"

I've learned from some of my companions, because some of them feel worn out by their accidents and others are happy, content. They jump up and down, leap, and I laugh. It's thanks to God and my uncle Juan who has helped so much that I feel this way, that I can bear everything that's happened to me. Some of my friends can't; I don't know what will happen to them.

I'm doing well in everything at school, though the exams are really tough. I've never gotten a 1 in the school, only 3 A and "excellent" or "outstanding" in everything else. They told me that when I finished school, I could study wherever I wanted.

I work in a blue jeans factory "polishing" pants. When they sew, extra pieces of thread have to be cut off on the pant legs, around the zipper, and the belt loops. The most I've ever earned in a day is \$40,000 pesos and the least, \$30,000 pesos. I haven't made less or more. One day, I made like 200 pants, and one day, when I had to make children's pants, I didn't make more than 50 the first day. It depends on what the pants are like and on how I feel, because sometimes I wake up feeling lazy...I hardly feel like doing anything.

I want to make my way forward in the world doing what I want to do and helping my family. As my mom says, even though you're doing fine, you must help your brother when he needs help; you must help a friend who has helped you; you lend a hand. Just like they taught me at Cirec. That's why I want to help others, including those who've helped me.

The most difficult thing for my family is that I lost my foot, though I'm as cheerful as if nothing had ever happened. My mom feels sad; she cries, and I tell her: "but mom, don't cry, thanks to God I'm fine, it was just a foot, just imagine that nothing ever happened...mom, don't cry!" Then we start talking normally, like I'm talking now. I cheer her up. Instead of her helping me, I help her. I've helped my family by being happy.

I tell my God that I want a good husband, that I don't want him to be like those guys who beat women these days; that he be good. Because with all I've experienced...I deserve a husband who is good to me and treats me well. That's what my mom says too: "when you get married, make sure your husband knows how to appreciate you as a woman and also for what you lost: that he not be embarrassed to be seen with you because of your foot." My mom always says it.

Now, I really do feel happy because the house that we bought is big with a normal floor. I walk on my knees or jump and I act as if nothing had happened and my mom does too. We are happy to have bought this house, because before, without a house, without anything...we lacked a few things you need to live well. But now we have those things, thank God.

My dream – let it come to pass – is that everything work out for my brothers and that I too move forward in life, because even though we were displaced, my mother's family humiliated us a lot. We want to show them that despite all the things that have happened to us, we can progress, that thanks to God, we've not been left behind.

I imagine that in 20 years, I will have finished my studies, that we will all have good jobs and a place in society, and that I will be married. I imagine me and my husband and my kids living well and my brothers too. That we won't have to work on the street, that we won't have to beg our neighbours for food, that with the jobs we have, we won't have to ask anybody for anything. That's what I imagine in 20 years time.

My dad...I don't know. I tell my mom that when my dad comes back, that he should give me his last name, that I want to have his last name. Because when I was born, my mom broke up with him, but he told her they should stay together so he could give me his surname. But my mom said "no." My dad was one of those men who raped kids and because of that my mom left him. I tell my mom that when he returns we should receive him as if normal. But my mom says "no" because since he made us suffer he should suffer some too. Because if he had been by our side, none of this would have ever happened. We don't have any word of him: we don't know if he's dead or alive or where he could be. We don't know. My oldest brother says: "let's hope he never comes back, or I'll chase him away with a club." My sister and I want him to come back to see how he's turned out, if he's the same as before.

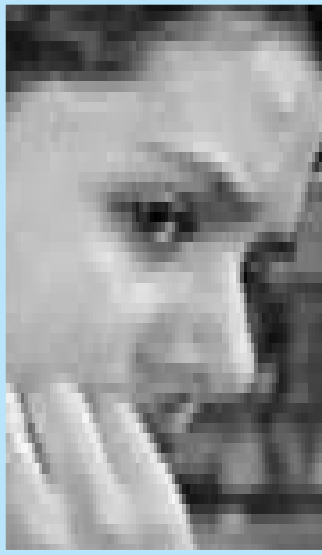
*My sister also says: "when I'm 18, I'll return."*

*I tell her that I will too.*

*But I tell her I want to return with Mom.*







## Ana Dilia\*

### AGE

35 years old.

### BACKGROUND

Peasant farmer and teacher, mother of three girls.

### DETAILS

Was displaced from Catatumbo, Norte de Santander.

### *I was raised in the countryside*

I was born in a small town called Las Mercedes (in Norte de Santander). I lived in the countryside until I was 17. Since my Dad never had his own property, we moved from farm to farm. Then we went to live in a small hamlet. There I made all the sacrifices imaginable. I studied at night, worked by day, helped to keep up the house and paid the expenses of my siblings. We are 14 kids in the family. Then, because of an illness, my mom had to move to Cúcuta, and my dad and half my family went too. I was the oldest.

Out of the blue, a boy who was a close friend of mine asked me if I wanted to work as a teacher. I thought that he was kidding. I said yes. But I also told him that I had worked all my life in agricultural jobs, and, when the opportunity presented itself, in households. But I made my decision. We went to talk to a town council member – the very person I had helped with housework – and she assisted me in contacting the mayor. Then I began to work.

With that job, I was able to pay debts, the rent and food for my family. I think I was lucky because, as if by magic, I got a contract. Never in my life would I have imagined that. I had dreamed of studying and being somebody important in life, but not as a teacher.

### *I learned to work with the community*

At that time, I was teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade at the school. I would sit and read school books day after day. I would walk an hour from the hamlet to the school and go to bed at 1 am or 2 am reading, studying, and correcting homework. I continued like that for one hectic year. I learned to work with the community and the kids. I got along well with people – they didn't want to let me leave. But I fell in love. So I left the school to go to another hamlet and start again as a farm labourer.

Far away – eight hours walking distance from the hamlet – there was a little school that didn't have a teacher. They sought me out and I went to work there. Again, I ended up walking an hour from the house to the school. I worked for three years there in the midst of the conflict. Because the hamlet was isolated, there was a large guerrilla presence. There I lived in terror of the guerrillas, because I had not seen those groups much before.

Because of a law that was passed, those who hadn't graduated from high school, couldn't work as teachers. So the municipality fired us. We went back to working in the same farm where he started doing farm work, picking coffee. Then one day, my father called me. At that time, he was living in La Gabarra<sup>1</sup>. He told me I should go work there, that they needed a teacher there. I had

\* Name changed at the request of the interviewee. 1 Santander del Norte, close to the border with Venezuela.

never liked that town, because there was lots of prostitution there. But out of necessity we decided to go anyway, because where we lived was isolated. It was hard to make a living there.

I began to work in La Gabarra and I heard that there were many armed groups around – groups here, groups there. After a month, I regretted my decision. When the day arrived for signing the contract, I said that I wouldn't take the job. Eight days later, I went to help my mother register my siblings for school and heard that they needed a teacher there. When I went to hand in the necessary documents for my siblings, I asked at the school if they needed a teacher. They said "yes." I said: "I have experience as a teacher, I'd like to teach." They said "no, here we don't take on strangers, only people from the region." My spirits sagged. I continued to live with my relatives, selling *ayacas*<sup>2</sup>, to support myself. My daughters got sick as soon as we arrived because of the change in climate. My husband went to work in the countryside. But he wasn't used to the culture of the area or the kind of work:

*raspar hoja*<sup>3</sup>, fertilizing, and fumigating, and he too got sick. Maybe he got sick because of the waters contaminated with the residues from coca processing, because all

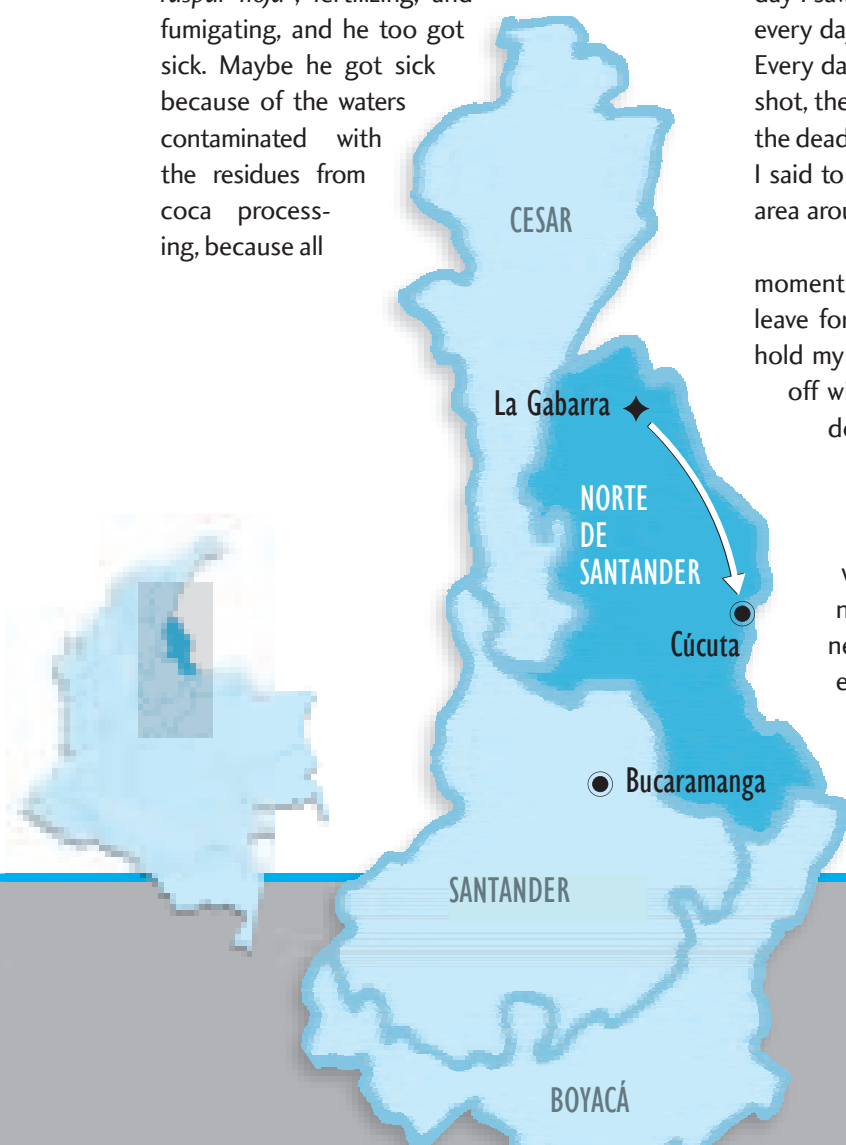
the chemicals that they use to process the coca leaves end up in the streams. The environment is very contaminated.

I told my husband that we should go back and live where we were before because there weren't any work opportunities in La Gabarra. Then a lady from the neighbourhood approached me and told me that on the day of school registration, she had heard that I wanted to work as a teacher. She asked if I still felt like teaching. I told her yes, because I had five years of experience and enjoyed it. I still hadn't finished high school. But I went to speak with the director of the school and I had an interview so I could start to work. I was lucky because I stayed in the hamlet. I ended up working there for four years.

#### A problem of nerves

Those four years were very tough. The kids got sick, my husband was sick. And I had to work to pay the rent, the food, the medicines, everything. But little by little, I made progress. Every day I saw the dead. That's what most affected me: every day, every day, a dead body arrived in town. Every day, the stabbed, the clubbed to death, the shot, the recently dead, the rotten dead; every day the dead arrived. I wanted to see the dead because I said to myself: "What if one of them is from the area around my home; I should tell my people."

God gives courage to you in a certain moment. At midday, when the students would leave for home, I would arrive at my house and hold my jaws. It was as if they were about to fall off with the stress and headache. I would lay down at once to sleep. I would sleep a little and then wake up to eat. But I couldn't eat much. I couldn't eat much for all the pain I was feeling. When I had eaten, I would do the household chores. Then at night I would prepare my classes for the next day. I would make the effort because everything is very expensive there and if you don't work it's difficult to support yourself.



The effect of seeing so much violence built up in me. I came to suffer from a problem of nerves, which became worse with the excess of stress. With everything there so expensive and so difficult, I worked as a teacher. I made and sold tamales wrapped in plantain leaves, I set up a little food and drink stand on the sidewalk, and worked for some neighbourhood leaders as a secretary.

Meanwhile, it all built up in me until I nearly went crazy. I couldn't renew my contract (as a teacher) during those months, and I neglected my daughters. My life consisted of sitting in a chair and then falling asleep. I didn't eat, drink, bath, dress or do anything else. I spent my savings on medicines, but I still didn't recover; I didn't do anything. In the end after spending a lot of money, I found a drug that worked. I began to recover little by little.

Every day I travelled: I felt lost, I didn't know if I was in my right mind and I decided to come live in the city. I arrived in the city. But in July, when classes started again, they didn't want to re-employ me, and I had to return to where we were living before. The day that we arrived, they seized the husband of a companion and slit his throat.

#### *And the self-defense forces began to arrive*

I began to work when the self-defence forces began their incursion. It was May 29 (1999) at a site called Socuavo<sup>4</sup>. I began to get sick again from so much anxiety. People would tell me that the self-defence forces would come to town or that they wouldn't come to town; that they would come at night or that they would come in the day. ...We didn't eat, we didn't drink, we didn't sleep. People went down to the river to flee. I didn't want to leave because I didn't want to leave behind my things or my husband. He had to stay behind because at that moment they weren't letting men embark, but only the women and children. Those they sent to Venezuela.

My problem was psychological, and it had gotten severe. I was about to end up with my

mind erased, according to the doctor. I spoke with my husband about whether we should leave too and he told me: "you have psychological problems. Yes, it's better that you go; I don't want you to go crazy. I don't want to have to take you to an insane asylum because of a public order problem." The doctor told him "She will end up in an insane asylum or dead. She is suffering from a severe stress problem that could affect her heart." My husband wanted to send me out with the kids to work for our daily food. But I refused. I said to him: "Alone, what am I going to do? I'm sick. If I go thinking that you're going to stay behind that might affect me more." But he said: "What I know how to do is work in the countryside. I don't want to go to the city because there life is harder." But I wasn't able to convince him. By the time I had made my decision to return, they had surrounded the town and there was no way out.

Though I had decided to return, when I checked to see if there was transport, I found out there was only a truck. There were no more cars. There was no fuel for the canoes and there wasn't any way to bring fuel into the area. So what did I do? I took a small bag and packed it with my two daughters' clothes, clothes that I had on hand at the moment. Then I went and stood in the middle of the highway at a flat spot: "The truck will have to stop to pick me up because I can't stay here," I said to myself. I asked a neighbour who also was leaving to stand with me in the middle of the highway so that the truck would stop and pick us up. It was the only way we could get the driver to stop. That's how we were able to get out of there: there was no other transport.

I found myself in the truck alongside my students. They said to me "ay, where are you going teacher,?" "No, darling, I'm going to Tibú for another doctor's appointment, but I'll be back." I said that because I felt really bad leaving them behind. They would go out onto the highway, see people passing by, and feel sad that they had to stay behind. I was asked the same thing at all the roadblocks, and as I had my medical prescriptions, I would say: "I'm sick and I'm going to a doctor's

2 Tamales or food wrapped in plantain leaves. 3 Collecting coca leaves. 4 They stayed in the zone for a month., leaving more than 130 people dead and causing the massive displacement of peasant farmer families.

appointment in Tibú.” That was the strategy for getting out of there. My husband stayed behind; he stayed behind working. I got my daughters out. But everything else was left behind, everything, everything. My husband didn’t want to leave. He said that we hadn’t done anything wrong, that nothing was going to happen to us. He said there was nothing for us in the city, that all our lives we had been farmers. The only thing that he likes is the countryside. So he stayed. I said to him “Come, give away our house, give away our refrigerator, but come.” I said that because at that time he was a community leader and they were taking and killing community leaders.

#### *More than 100 dead in La Gabarra*

When the paramilitaries entered our hamlet it was their sixth incursion into La Gabarra; the first had been at Socuavo. Nine people were killed. As the paramilitaries advanced further, they kept killing, killing, killing, killing. When they arrived in Vetás, next to a site called 46, they attacked a building and killed and wounded some of the occupants. That same afternoon, they returned to the site and killed some civilians there. This was a place where people came to catch rides. There were people from the countryside who normally came on Friday afternoons to get rides into town. The paramilitaries came and killed everybody. Then they burned the building down.

My husband was working on a road up above and he heard the shooting. He was too afraid to come down and try to get a ride; so instead he went down the next day and had to walk over nine bodies in order to get a ride. He went down to the hamlet of La Gabarra on Saturday afternoon. That night there was another incursion into La Gabarra, and it was really the worst. The media that night talked about a few dead. But, in reality, there were more than 100. There were bodies on the road wherever the paramilitaries had moved.

He stayed for a few days there until he realized that he couldn’t convince me to re-

turn. Then he left. When he decided to leave, the men from the self-defence forces were not letting anybody take anything from their homes. Whoever tried to move their household belongings by car was made to return and then prevented from leaving the town. So he had to leave with a small bag and two sets of clothing. And he had to say: “I’m going to run an errand in Tibú that’s all.” He couldn’t bring anything and that’s how we lost everything, everything.

#### *I come from La Gabarra*

When I arrived in Cúcuta, the first thing I did was look for my sister-in-law who was working there and knew the city. Everything else had to wait because I felt sick. I didn’t know what to do, whether to look for work or not, because my daughters were very little, and I couldn’t leave them alone. I didn’t feel well enough to subject myself to just any kind of job. I stayed put, and my sister-in-law helped me out for a month. She brought me food. Every Sunday she would come and visit, bringing friends so we could talk and get everything off our chests. Because I had arrived there, taken a room and shut myself away. I shut my daughters away too. They didn’t have a radio or a television or anything there; I would make them dinner and that’s it. I would go out to wash clothes and come back and shut my self away with the girls. I didn’t go out because, as I was sick, the doctor told me that I had to rest. I stayed there until I was well enough to go out and look for work.

My sister-in-law told me to go out, to not shut myself away, to not be silly, that these things happened in life. She said that the most important thing was that I had escaped with my life, that I hadn’t lost anything. I had lost only material things, not my life and I had to get well again. On the weekends, she brought friends. She would say: “Let’s make a stew, have a get together.” It ended up being a big help to me because it cleared my mind. She was very good to my daughters. Sometime she would say: “Let’s go,

get out, go to a park.” and, by force they would get me out of the house. She brought us food, clothes for the girls, shoes...doing all those things that you don't forget.

When I was separated from my husband, we didn't communicate because the paramilitaries had cut the telephone lines when they arrived in La Gabarra. The only thing I could do was listen to the news. He sent word with an evangelical pastor that he would leave. But he said that he had to wait to be paid. He had been working as an assistant in the construction of a house. Until he finished laying some bricks, he wouldn't get paid.

He had worked for a month and saved up because he knew we had to pay rent. Then he turned up at the room that we had rented. He hadn't been there 24 hours when two guys appeared, shoved him under the bed, put weapons to his head and to those of my girls and carried off everything he had brought in savings, everything. I wasn't there at that precise moment because I was buying lunch. But when I arrived they had him on the floor. They asked me for the bag that he had brought, because the idea was that, since he worked in the countryside, he had come with “merchandise.”<sup>5</sup> But no, when working in the countryside became too dangerous, he began to work in construction and for that reason he had a bag full of tools. He said to them: “No, look this is what I do.” They realized that he didn't have anything. So they stole the money that he had earned in a month of work. Then they took off and left us without anything, broke.

After we were robbed in the city, he decided to go back to our plot of land to work; I stayed alone working, washing clothes. But it was difficult: people didn't give you work. They said: “where did you come from, where are you from?” You would innocently say: “I come from La Gabarra” and with that “no, no, I can't give you work.”

I don't know what reasons they had, maybe it was fear, distrust. But I spent three months begging for laundry work so I could support my daughters. He had left and hadn't returned. Nor did he sent money or letters, because

he was afraid that I would go back to our plot of land. I was worried because the self-defence forces began to go there. I was determined to work, washing and ironing, and so support my daughters, if he didn't want to come to us.

#### *And so we went from place to place*

I searched out a grandmother in El Zulia and took the decision to go and live there for free, because paying rent for a room was too expensive. But in that way I took on an additional responsibility. I had to support my grandmother, and pay utilities. She was letting me stay there because she lived alone. It worked out for me because I kept her company and she kept me company. I went out to work and she took care of my daughters. I kept on that way, working and ironing, whatever came up. If they said to me “come, sweep up” then I swept up; if they said “come wash” then I washed; if they said “come I need you to do this job” I would do it. I would do anything to support myself. Then he decided to leave Las Mercedes, because things had gotten difficult, with rumours that the paramilitaries were going to appear there. We talked on the phone and when he was doing well in his job, he would send some money for food; when not, I would scramble to get by.

We lived for two years like that, practically separated. Then we got together again and set ourselves up on a small plot of land that we were given. We worked for nine months there and then everything was lost. They didn't pay us and we had to leave again for another place. We worked for three years at that new place until problems began with the boss. He was jailed and had to pay some money to get out. Since he didn't have any money, he told us he would pay us, but that first we had to move off the farm so he could sell it. If he sold it, he would pay us something. We moved off the farm, and he never paid us.

And so we moved from place to place. At present we are living in house a man left us to live in. We pay the services, but it's in a hamlet so

it takes a half an hour to get to town. He plants spicy peppers, and we survive from that harvest. He's left with 40,000 pesos, 25,000<sup>6</sup> pesos weekly and with that we get by. With that, five people can eat. There are months when he earns 150,000 pesos, but there are months where he makes 100,000, 80,000 and we have to get by with that. It's not enough. You have to achieve miracles. "What are you going to do?" You can't be excessive either. If you end up owing money, you're worse off.

### *I'm not used to living by begging*

It's difficult. You're brought up so that, with a little or a lot, you have money you can count on each month. To arrive in a city and live off of people's good will, to ask for clothes in which to dress and dress your daughters no, no, I don't like it. I'm not used to live by begging. I would like to have my old job back again, an independent job, a source of income that could satisfy our needs. It makes me very sad to see our daughters asking for things and not be able to give them what they need. It's very difficult. I haven't been able to get over it. Because if you have a source of income that's at least dignified, if you're earning at least 200,000, 300,000 pesos each month, there's a lot you can solve. But it's not even that amount ...! So when sickness strikes, everything gets complicated. You can't put off dealing with sickness.

School is the hardest thing. My daughters have always studied by begging, by asking for money, and they are tired of not having the things they need, of being the last ones to hand in their homework because there's no money to pay for copies. They're frustrated. The older girl tells me that she doesn't want to study anymore. At 13 years old, she's in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and wants to quit school. She says she's tired: to get to school, she has to walk a half an hour each morning to school and another half hour in the afternoon to get home. At school, they don't even give her a coupon for lunch. I tell her that she has to study, and I plead with her, but I can't satisfy her needs. On

top of that, she's a teenager. She's started to see that her companions have nice things, a bracelet, nice notebooks... and I can't give her that pleasure. I think that's why she feels frustrated and wants to quit school.

That's not a problem with the other two girls because they're still young and they settle for what you can give them. But with a teenager it's different... "Look, my classmates have nice shoes, I like those shoes," whereas with the smallest ones, no. Since they're still little, they don't focus on those things. It has me a bit worried because I don't know what to do. The teenager has to help with household chores so I can run errands. I think maybe that's why she's getting tired. I don't know what to do.

My head spins. One solution would be to send her to a boarding school where she could spend all her time studying. But I don't have money to pay for a boarding school. I've thought of pleading with her and motivating her to study, of insisting that she stay in school even if she has to repeat a year, but of insisting that she finish high school. If she quits she'll get demoralized. She'll lose her rhythm even more. I dream that they can study and not just take any old job, like sometimes you have to do.

In the countryside, things are easier if you have your own property. You can economize. But when that property is someone else's, you can economize for awhile. But then a moment arrives when all your effort is lost, and someone else ends up enjoying the fruits of your labour. My greatest wish is to get or have given to us another plot of land. I tell my husband that we should buy a house near an urban area where we can work a hectare or two of land, because his happiness is working the land. He does whatever work he can find because in the city a person like him, who has only completed 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, can't get a job. He tells me that as long as he has land to plant vegetables, grow a crop with modern methods – because he understands that well, that's his profession – that he will accompany me to a city. I don't want to accompany him to the

countryside because I worry about my daughters' education. If I go to the countryside where will they study? It will be harder to find them a place to study, especially in secondary school. And the girls say the same thing. One of them says to me: "Mom, I want us to buy a house, but one with a good garden. I want to have chickens. I don't want to kill them or sell them." They don't like normal houses, because they were brought up to be in the countryside, in the fresh air. But they want to study.

As a teacher, you always have a 10-month contract. So it's impossible to move. Three years after I left, they offered me a contract in a municipality. But I didn't want to take it because it was eight hours away, and especially because of the security concerns. On top of that, my daughters were studying. I couldn't go and leave them behind or take them with me without knowing where I would end up. At the time, I was supporting them because my husband was working far away. So I didn't want to take the job. You leave displaced from one place and go to another and from there you aren't displaced by the same group but by another group. I told myself: "I prefer to live calmly. If I have to beg, I'll beg, but I won't take that job," It was because of the safety issue...I just didn't want to take it.

Now, he's more aware of things; he's become more responsible...Everything else has been normal. We haven't had problems. Our home hasn't been a conflictive one of fights or anything like that. We talk a lot. Sometimes, he tells me not to leave the house, because I leave it alone for long stretches of time and the children need me around. I tell him: "Yes, it's true, I understand. But if I don't leave home, if I don't talk to people and look around, what solutions are we going to find? Where will we end up going? We have to get out and talk to people. We don't have anything of our own; we go from place to place. If today we are told "leave" then we will have to leave. If I'm here with you doing nothing, what will we do? We can't do anything." On that point, he doesn't contradict me much. He says: "Well,

that's fine, find a way to resolve our problems, see how you can improve our situation." Still, tells me sometimes not to leave home. He says he doesn't want me running around, spending money. He says that not only do I end up spending the little that I get, but that I spend time and I end up all worn out. But I tell him that I have to do my best to try and improve our situation. Because nothing is going to rain down on us from the sky.

I have a housing subsidy that helps. Our future is buying a house. But we won't buy one in a small municipality. My thinking is this: we lived in a small town once and were displaced and had to leave everything behind. The same thing could happen in any small municipality. That's my first thought. The second is that, as a leader, you can be displaced at any time. If they give you a deadline, you have to leave your things behind, discarded. And finally, I still dream that my daughters can get an education. I know that in a city, if they can't find a place to study, they can train in some art or other thing. But in a small town, it's hard to imagine a future like that.

So I've decided to buy a house nearby or look for something a bit farther from the city, a place with a small piece of land and access to the city so my daughters can go to school. They are my future. My husband says that he wants to find a place where he can work. He doesn't want to leave again after all the trauma we've suffered and because of his illness. But he doesn't do the talking. It's me that has to go out and look for things and talk to people. When I leave home, he just keeps our daughters company in the house.

#### *I decided to take on the role of leader*

I've gone from house to house, from place to place, working, losing work. His illness keeps getting worse every day. He feels really sick, and our financial situation has made it impossible to find stability in any one place. Since as a displaced person, people look at you as if you were a problem and you are discriminated against by society, it's difficult to survive. It's hard to re-

cover that tranquillity you once had. It was while thinking these things that I decided to become a leader. All my life I've enjoyed working as a leader of something, whether of children or women...I decided to work as a leader of displaced people, of people who are poorer in spirit. I wanted to fight for things. Because it's unfair that you are never able to recover what you've lost...and there is the lingering psychological trauma. I've suffered need, trauma. I don't want anyone else to have to suffer as I suffered. I don't want any other child to have to go through the same things my daughters had to go through.

I think the best way to get things off your chest is through a connection with other people. At the time, I didn't have a job that connected me directly with people, like before. So I decided to become a leader. It's a lot of work. But you are involved with people and you dispel the worries that you have. I ended up getting used to working with the communities. It was something I needed. It wasn't a job; I didn't have an income or anything. But I said to myself: "At least, I have something to do." Though I don't earn anything doing this, I'm content. I'm working for something and someone.

You see lots of people exploited. You see displaced people with many needs, and you see the distance of the municipal governments and their employees. Sometimes programs are implemented, but they are given other uses than those that were intended. You notice, and you feel bad that you could help and aren't doing anything about it. If a simple donation for the most needy arrives, for example, you can ensure that that donation is given to the people who really need it and not to the few who have what they need, the most privileged.

#### *Honorably, you are displaced people*

The label of displaced person is still very oppressive for us, because as soon as you say displaced person, people begin to give you ugly looks. They try to find out "why did he come,

where did he come from, what was he doing?" But it's something real that you can't deny. Before the eyes of God, you can't deny what you've suffered. And even less before the eyes of the state because if we all agreed to say that we weren't displaced or to hide it, it would suit the state. We have no reason to hide our reality when the state is responsible for what we've suffered.

I was among those who proposed to my association that we not use the word "displaced" in the association's name. But then a man said: "no, you are displaced and they can't take that title away from your organization. By the very fact of saying that you are displaced – and you are displaced and have suffered that trauma, you don't deny it – the state has to give you assistance. The municipality has to give you assistance. So why would you want to lose that option? Leave it there in the name of the association. It might seem ridiculous to some. But honourably, you are displaced people. You were displaced by actors having nothing to do with your will. Don't let them use another title that wouldn't be as honest. Better that they call you displaced than that they call you criminals." So I said: "If that's true, let's leave it that way. There are still many people for whom it's very difficult to accept. But when you are made aware, it doesn't affect you that much." Still, there are many people who get scared when you say "you are a displaced person." It's because of the insecurity that exists in our country.

#### *You don't negotiate peace, you have to build it*

I say demobilization is a big lie. It's a big lie because people have given declarations who were with the guerrillas and with the self-defence forces and are now with the armed forces. So for me it's a lie, it's like camouflage. It's a lie that they're demobilized. They've been legalized, not demobilized. Many people in our communities say the same thing. And those people have been unable to get rid of their feelings of fear and



anxiety. So it seems it's government camouflage; that it's not real, that they have camouflaged themselves to be able to do certain things: perhaps to find out where people are and what they are doing.

When talk began of a peace agreement, of a demobilization, we began to speak with various people, both displaced people, and non-displaced people who had been victims of these now demobilized fighters. Many of their beloved ones had died because of these people. We asked ourselves: "What are they going to do with all these people that got used to living off the labour of others, that got used to living, as an old man told me, 'very cushy,' well dressed, well fed, taking money from other people?" We've always concluded that the demobilized will have to form another group. Or maybe the government will have to finance them for some time... For people who never liked to work, it was convenient to get involved in this. After being involved, they're not going to want to go back to sweating in their t-shirts under the sun like the peasant farmers who had to leave their lands behind.

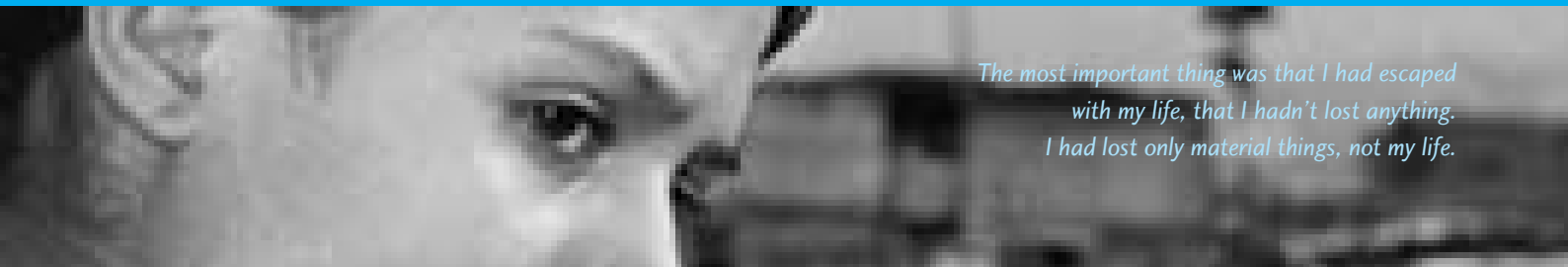
We believe that the demobilized fighters have benefited the most from this and not the victims. There are many programs for the displaced. But the programs created for the demobilized are much more efficient than those created for us, the displaced. The demobilized get their training paid for – not only the demobilized, but also those who deserted from the guerrillas. For having handed in a weapon and confessed some truths and lies, they get protection. They get help in leaving the country, and, if necessary, their families are offered protection as well. A peasant farmer, who has worked honourably all his life, doesn't get that kind of help. So it's one of the injustices of life. Sometimes we get to talking. We say: "To get a benefit from the state these days you have to kill. It seems that for honest labourers, for peasant farmers, there is no future. There's no promising future. That's only for people who commit crimes, who violate human rights.

They look at those kind of people and immediately they help them out. But for us...no!

I think that war generates more war. I think that a family that has lost a beloved one will never be a whole family. So I think that if you don't build peace in your home, there won't be peace...Peace isn't negotiated. Peace is built up from the base, from the family, from childhood... The child is the first to see this kind of violence. He is the first to see how all type of human rights are violated and to see the kind of films that the media transmits on television. I think that peace has to be built from below and not negotiated. Sometimes I get to thinking about our family. I talk to my husband. I say: "What peace, what agreements can you achieve negotiating with a group of old men who've been raised in stubbornness and who aren't going to change their way of thinking...?"

You have to change your way of thinking. The future is for the children, not for the old people. The old ones have already gotten used to living a certain way and that's how they'll die. The old ones have been through these peace negotiations all their lives. The negotiations are strategies for providing reports to other countries, perhaps to get money, but they won't create a better future for the country.

The good times I lived with the students. I've always liked working with kids. I have fond memories of going to workshops when I finished high school. And when I managed to leave La Gabarra, I felt a great relief. I had been thinking only about getting my daughters out of there. After that, there was more tranquillity. There are traumas that have been difficult to erase. Nonetheless, I've overcome many of those things. I'm frightened by the rumours going around that the self-defence forces are going to take up arms again. I worry that on the least expected day they could come for us. But not the rest. You assimilate it and forget it. It's not as bad as the moment when you had to leave your home and couldn't find anything to do.



*The most important thing was that I had escaped with my life, that I hadn't lost anything. I had lost only material things, not my life.*





# Abuna Animona\*

## AGE

30 years old.

## BACKGROUND

Barí Indian. He lives on the Ikiakadra reserve (Norte de Santander).

## DETAILS

He has been forcibly displaced within his ancestral lands.

### *We are a force that emanates from the forest*

I'm 30 years old and I have a large family that extends across all the [indigenous] communities [in the area] and into Venezuela. I will tell you sad true story, lived by our ancestors for centuries, reflections passed down from generation to generation.

Early in my life, when I was five years old, I was told the complete history of the Barí people<sup>1</sup>. Everything was dark, there was no Earth, no sun, no water or stars, no food, fish, forest, fire nor any species at all. There were only pineapples and small bushes, where Sabaseba and Saymadoyira were to be found; the first is God and the second Jesus Christ, and from there the Barí evolved and became known as children of the forest. From infinite space, Sabaseba created life and with it the reason for existence of a people: Ishtana<sup>2</sup>. They are stories that extend back beyond memory.

We write our story day by day. We are young and we should be aware of our ancestors' experiences, we should learn their wisdom, which brings our culture and traditions forward into the present. We are a people who resist displacement, we are brave. But we have long been pursued by the state and Ecopetrol<sup>3</sup>, and sometimes it feels as if the armed conflict will only end when the last Barí is dead.

The words of the Barí are not diminished by the passing of time. On the contrary, kept on our lands they endure. Our children and the new generations will remember them, in the same way that in the ground that they walk on lie the ashes of our ancestors and wise ones. *When the sun comes up, among the many looks, the Barí wakes from his dream of hope – Barí who love what they feel is theirs.*

Our mother tongue has always been the most natural way to communicate amongst ourselves. It's what identifies us a unique people, born of the Earth and belonging to it, where the voices of our souls are recorded.

The Barí are well-known as a warrior people, because we've been strong and managed to survive the tough challenges of life in the forest, and of the Spanish invaders and the state riding roughshod over us. We've got a reputation as a warrior tribe, and we are – but not in the sense that the white man understands. For them, a man fights to impose his will, sometimes at the cost of causing injury and death. We believe that the work of a warrior is maintain harmony, both internally and externally. We have a deep conviction that keeps us from doing harm to others, and from an early age our *contradictions* teach us to respect nature. That's why our communities are so different from cities and the world of the civilised.

\* The interview, originally in the Barí language, was not recorded at the request of the interviewee. This version has been adapted and added to by the interviewer. <sup>1</sup> They call themselves the Barí, which means 'people'; they are also known as 'motilones', and they live in the Catatumbo basin in both Colombia and Venezuela. <sup>2</sup> For the Barí, their territory - Ishtana - has a close, sacred and spiritual connection to their existence as a people: "Without our land there are no Barí, and without the Barí our land will not be preserved." <sup>3</sup> Colombia's state oil company.

I give thanks to the warriors, the wise men and the messengers who've taken up the cause in difficult times and I dedicate to them the memory of our 'saymadoyi', ancestors who fought morally and spiritually to keep us together as equals and to conserve our lands.

I'm a youth. I've shared good times and bad with our people, and those experiences have strengthened us as Barí. Their lessons, their words, are born of a Barí heart. They are an integral part of us. We've always been building our paths. The trees, the sun, the moon, the stars and the animals are in the right place and doing what they should. That's how we put together our life history as a people. The path, the light that shows us where we should be going.

We, the Barí, are a force that emanates from the forest, from the birds, and we are in contact with beings beyond our own lives. They give us vitality and teach us the important lessons through our traditional ancestors, wise men and messengers, who contribute their knowledge so that we youth don't fall

into darkness. As has happened with other peoples, when they become divided they lose their culture, traditions, customs and language.

Our ancestors' wisdom is part of the best lesson in life. I'm young, I feel proud to be Barí and I never want to stop being one. The Earth is the source of everything today and the building block of tomorrow. It's the other half of the Barí. It's life, the reflection of our

ancestors. It's the story of a struggle, it's a living legend. Our young people know that and they look after it with their bodies, their reason, their dreams and their memories...for the well-being of future generations of Barí.

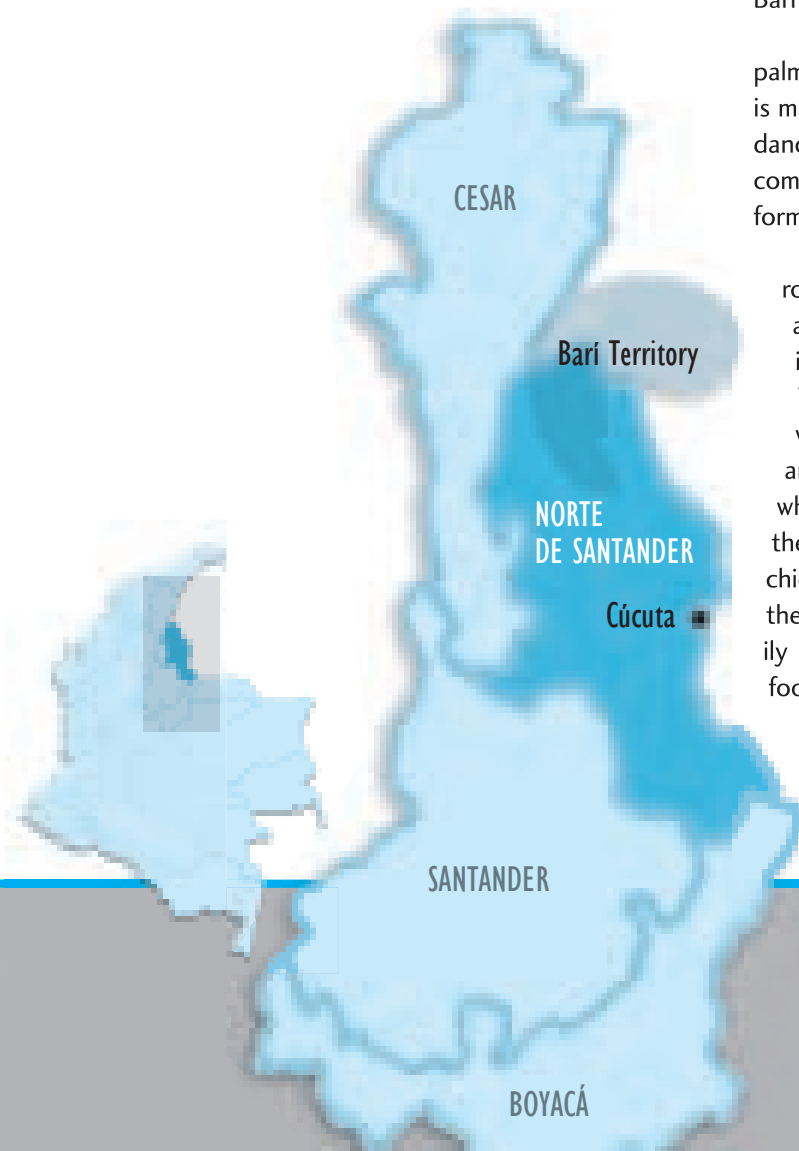
#### *The 'bohio' or communal house – a symbolic representation*

The communal house<sup>4</sup> represents symbolically the relationship the Barí have with each other and the world around them. It is our permanent home, our place of relaxation, of meeting, of discussion, of reflection with the family. All the Barí's family activities take place inside it.

I've seen a 'bohio' built. They use palm brought from the mountain, and the base is made from local wood. They are built in accordance with the philosophy and world view of each community, and that's why they take on different forms from community to community.

There are oval communal houses, round ones and some long ones. Inside there are a number of different areas. The first is where the fires inside the building are lit. The second is the area of rooms or cubicles where the Barí hang their hammocks, which are made by the women. This is also the area where different members can stay, according to their social standing, that is to say the warriors, chiefs and other representatives that come to the communal house. In the last area each family has a place dedicated to the distribution of food – yuca, plantains and other supplies and provisions.

These days, some communi-



ties also have concrete buildings, especially those most influenced by settlers. These communities have adapted because the invaders burned down the communal houses so they could steal the land.

In the 1960s, after the warriors injured him, a tall, blond stranger<sup>5</sup> appeared for the first time on Barí land in Colombia's Catatumbo region. On his journey, the messengers protected him. He was a humble person and responsible, someone who was going to be a friend to the Barí. In the forest, he learned to eat like the Barí, he learned to speak Barí and he sent Barí children away to be educated. They weren't accepted in Cúcuta, but he gave some of our young people the chance to study in Bucaramanga. Since then, they've built homes and schools in concrete – the work of señor Bruce Olson. Thanks to his new way of building, the Barí have adopted, as a strategic plan, the use of concrete houses instead of traditional ones, on the condition that they maintain the traditional houses, or 'bohios' to contribute to the best personal development, to a better standard of living for the Barí.

The story also goes that our ancestors gathered the men and women in groups to advise them. They did this at night, when the men and women were walking on their way to hunt or fish. They repeated their stories about creation, about their world view, the moon, the water, the earth, the sky, the trees, the caves, the animals and about the origin of man. It was when they retold the story of the creation of the Barí woman and the Barí man. The ancestors advised, they healed and they shared their wisdom so that it wouldn't be forgotten, and at the same time the women taught their children to weave necklaces, shawls and other accessories.

### *Our forest invaded*

From the moment at which Sabaseba created the first Barí and throughout our history, we have been characterised as a force that emerged from the depths of the extensive forests

of Catatumbo. In the past our nation was home to many indigenous tribes who spoke different languages but who were unified by the same spirit. There was a perfect harmony and sovereignty over our land. It was like that for centuries, until the arrival of invader from the sea. They trampled on the dignity of legitimate people and completely suppressed their rights.

The Barí heard persistent rumours. "These people sow pain and tears as they pass!" All the news was the same – the spilling of blood, the raping of women, disease, disgrace and slavery. There was a period of expectancy and suspense until one day our breathless watchmen arrived. It was a critical moment for the Barí – our forests had been invaded! From then on everything that we were was in the hands of the warriors. What happened to our ancestors froze their blood.

The Barí followed them for hours. It was easy to keep up with them, as they emanated the rancid stink of people who only use water to drink and not to wash themselves. They made camp and - our brave warriors attacked them with bows and arrows! The invaders fell victim to the our excellent marksmen, who escaped unscathed. Killing is not normally the Barí way, but on this occasion our ancestors didn't rest until not one of them moved. It was a great act of bravery! Later they approached cautiously, and they were greeted with an even bigger surprise: the thing on four legs appeared to be complete. Yes, it was an animal, but what strange creature! Different to anything the Barí had ever seen in the jungle. I haven't had experiences like those of our ancestors, I just know the story that my family told me about fleeing to take refuge and about how the invaders ate away at our territory day by day. My grandparents were warriors at the time of the bloody war against the invaders, who were paid 1,000 pesos for each Barí head. They hunted us like animals.

The experiences of the Barí people make me think now of the term that the Spanish, during the colonisation, used for dark oil that comes out of the earth. They called it 'the devil's excrement', and they were probably right.

4 The 'bohio' or communal house determines the social structure of the group that lives inside it. It can accommodate up to a hundred people with alliance relationships. 5 This refers to Bruce Olson, a Norwegian citizen, who arrived on the Colombian side of the Catatumbo in 1961. He lived with the Barí for more than 30 years, and was kidnapped by the ELN between 1988 and 1989.

### *The colonisation of Barí land*

The Spanish founded Pamplona in 1549, and the discovery of gold in 1559 brought the area to the attention of miners and businessmen and even the state itself. The plan to establish a road from Pamplona to the south of Lake Maracaibo along the Zulia river, and crossing Barí land, caused new clashes.

As time passed the fight for the land got worse. Between 1700 and 1770 the clashes between the Spanish and the Barí intensified. At the same time, the first Capuchins arrived and succeeded in their aim of establishing settlements of evangelised indigenous people.

Despite the Capuchins' efforts, around 1800 the indigenous people who had joined the settlements returned to the forest, to their old way of life, although some of them stayed in contact with the white people. And over the same period, the Barí came under pressure from settler farmers and cocoa traders, who forced them further back into the forest and off their land.

### *The arrival of the multinational oil companies*

In 1914, contact increased with missionaries and other individuals, the latter driven by recent discoveries of oil, the extraction of other natural resources such as wood and the redistribution of land. Between 1910 and 1920, Barí territory began to be eaten into with the arrival of major multinationals in search of oil and other riches they discovered in Catatumbo. In 1931, the Chaux-Folsom contract was signed by the Colombian government and the companies<sup>6</sup>. The government handed over 186,805 hectares to the Colombian Petroleum Company (Colpet), and some of it on Barí land was given by concession to the foreign multinational. A process of colonisation began with excessive works in the region that led to the planning and in 1949 the founding of the town of Tibú.

This seizure of Barí land by the company and its workers, and the increase in the number

of settlers was met with violent opposition by the Barí warriors. The Barí offensive was the continuation of the struggle by our ancestors to preserve the Barí's territory, while the settlers' attacks were motivated by their rush to invade and colonise.

It is said that by 1983, the Barí had lost 90% of their land, their reason to exist. Moreover, the Barí have felt no economic or social benefit from the extraction of the oil, no royalties and no compensation for deaths at the hand of the state or the burning down of the communal houses in Axdobaringcayra, known today as the municipality of Tibú.

The colonisation of Barí territory took place on two fronts: in the municipalities of Curumaní and Pailitas in the department of Cesar, and in the municipality of Convención in the department of North Santander. The settlers came along Barí paths, and little by little they took the fertile plains and the best of the Barí lands, taking control of their hunting and fishing grounds and their sacred sites.

With the arrival of the invaders, Ecopetrol began exploration and extraction in the Álamo field<sup>7</sup>. When the community sought details of the project at Environment Ministry, we discovered that the ministry did not have details of planned exploration in the area.

Ecopetrol was operating without an environmental license in an ancestral homeland. We remember the aggression directed at our fathers and grandparents by the police in the area around Socbayara<sup>8</sup>, called the Álamo 1 well by Ecopetrol.

### *Armed conflict and the expropriation of land*

On top of the above, there are other problems affecting the indigenous Barí communities and they are directly linked to the armed conflict, which is driving the expropriation of ancestral lands.

We should analyse a bit more what the armed conflict implies for the country's indigenous communities. It has an obvious territorial element

6 The contract stated that "the government will provide the companies with the necessary protection to fend off hostility or attacks by the 'motilonés' and other savages who live in the areas which form part of the land covered by this contract. This work will be carried out by police, or if necessary the armed forces". Source: Ministerio de Industrias. Chaux Folsom contract and related documents; Bogotá, National Press, 1931. 7 The company entered Barí territory without permission from their traditional authorities or Colombian environmental officials. They sank one well- Álamo 1 - before the Constitutional Court ordered the company's operations to be suspended as they represented an abuse of the fundamental rights of the Barí. The ruling was made on February 5, 2007. 8 An ancestral place of passage and

- 75% of the country is affected by some sort of armed conflict. It's a fight for the control of rural areas, in which the absence of state institutions has generated a dynamic of increasing human rights abuses, displacements and killings from which the communities have not been able to escape.

It should be emphasised, however, that the most serious problem the communities face are the constant accusations levelled at the civil population by the armed groups. The accusation of being an auxiliary of one group by another can serve as a pretext for the assassination of members of the indigenous communities, bringing the conflict to areas that should be free of it. This happens insofar as the convergence of diverse interests in these areas allows for the armed groups to take advantage of the conflict to take control of the land.

The politics of democratic security<sup>9</sup>, the battallón de Alta Montaña (High Mountain Battalion)<sup>10</sup> and the major and uncontrolled waves of migration unleashed by oil have displaced Barí groups, and pushed them into the smallest of space which threatens their very existence.

As things stand today, members of all the parties to the armed conflict are present across Barí territory in flagrant disrespect of our traditional authorities.

The community has begun a new phase in the defence of its territory. When it comes down to it, we will stand our ground. There will be pressure from Ecopetrol and we will see how far the state is prepared to go to uphold its own values and notions of ethnic development, which are enshrined in the constitution.

communication, a sacred site in the Barí world view and spirituality, and where their ancestors rest and the Barí of Clear Eyes live. <sup>9</sup> This policy involves the recovery of land, expanding the armed forces and the involvement of civil society (networks of informants, peasant soldiers) in the fight against terrorism. <sup>10</sup> This refers to the High Mountain Battalion No. 7, which was formed to counter the guerrilla presence on the Perijá range. It operates in the departments of North Santander, La Guajira and Cesar. The creation of these strategic units is fundamental to the current democratic security policy.







## Cacique\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
60 years old.	Barí Indian.	Suffered forced displacement within his ancestral territory and was forced to remain in his community for 4 years.

### *Before and after civilization*

I'm going to tell how it was before civilization and after civilization. The problem for the grandfather chiefs started before civilization with the *conquista* (Spanish conquest) when they civilized us; we've had a lot of problems since. I see civilization as very bad; for us, the Indian race is much better. I remember the grandfathers would say to us that we had to take care of the territories, that that was our future, that when the children were born and married, they would stay on our land.<sup>1</sup> But today, it's the opposite; the whites want money and, in wanting money, cheat the Indian. The problem is very difficult, very difficult for me.

The problem is that civilization is very bad for us, but, at the same time, it's good. In what way is it good? Because we learn to respect people and get to know them. The way I see it is that first they teach you the good things, then they show you the bad ones. Why do I say that they show you the bad things? The problem is that they force us to sign a bunch of papers – one's you don't know anything about – and then, when we sign, they trick us and we cry, because we ask who it is that's violating our territory. Who? Because it's the government itself that has cheated us. Is it not?

### *We can't be happy*

The government, for me, is not good. A government that backs our territory, a government that leaves us alone, that's a good government; but if it doesn't show respect, as it doesn't today – problems: it has put an end to us, killed us. The state itself has pursued us – I don't know why? – the state itself has struck at the Indians, and then it says that it didn't.

The law says we're going to protect the Indians. Lies. Protect isn't the word, pardon me, it's screw. The truth, as I see it, is that they screwed us and they're screwing us still and later on they will end up killing us. The government itself has killed us and kills us because it is the state itself that sends the violence<sup>2</sup>. Just like the violence of the *chulavitas*<sup>3</sup> who killed for colour<sup>4</sup>. So I see that the government's policy is to fight; the government fights for the territory that is ours; it wants to finish us off.

Now, Alamo<sup>5</sup>, we know. Because they say it was the coca, but the violence wasn't because of the coca. Violence happens where there's oil land. That's what they want: that's why they kill people, kill Indians, and take control of the land. Yea, for oil. It's not the coca, because they consume coca and they can't finish it off. That's the thing.

Tibú belonged to the Indians. The gov-

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 For the Barí, the territory –*Ishtana*—has a sacred and spiritual significance very linked to their existence as a people: "Without Territory there are no Barí, without the Barí, the Territory is not conserved." 2 When the interviewee speaks of 'the violence' he refers to the paramilitaries. 3 Hired assassins of conservative affiliation during the period of the Violence; originally, police. 4 Refers to the political violence that gripped the country between 1946 and 1947. Each party was recognized by its distinctive colour: red, liberal and blue, conservative. 5 The state oil company Ecopetrol entered Barí Territory without the authorization of either the traditional authorities

ernment knows that we moved from Cúcuta to here; I wasn't born yet, but the grandfathers tell how it was. They took our territory; we let them. We thought that when we crossed the Catatumbo they were going to respect that territory as belonging to the Indians, that no one was going to step foot in our territory. Lies, they trampled on us; now we don't have either territory or anything else. So what can we do?

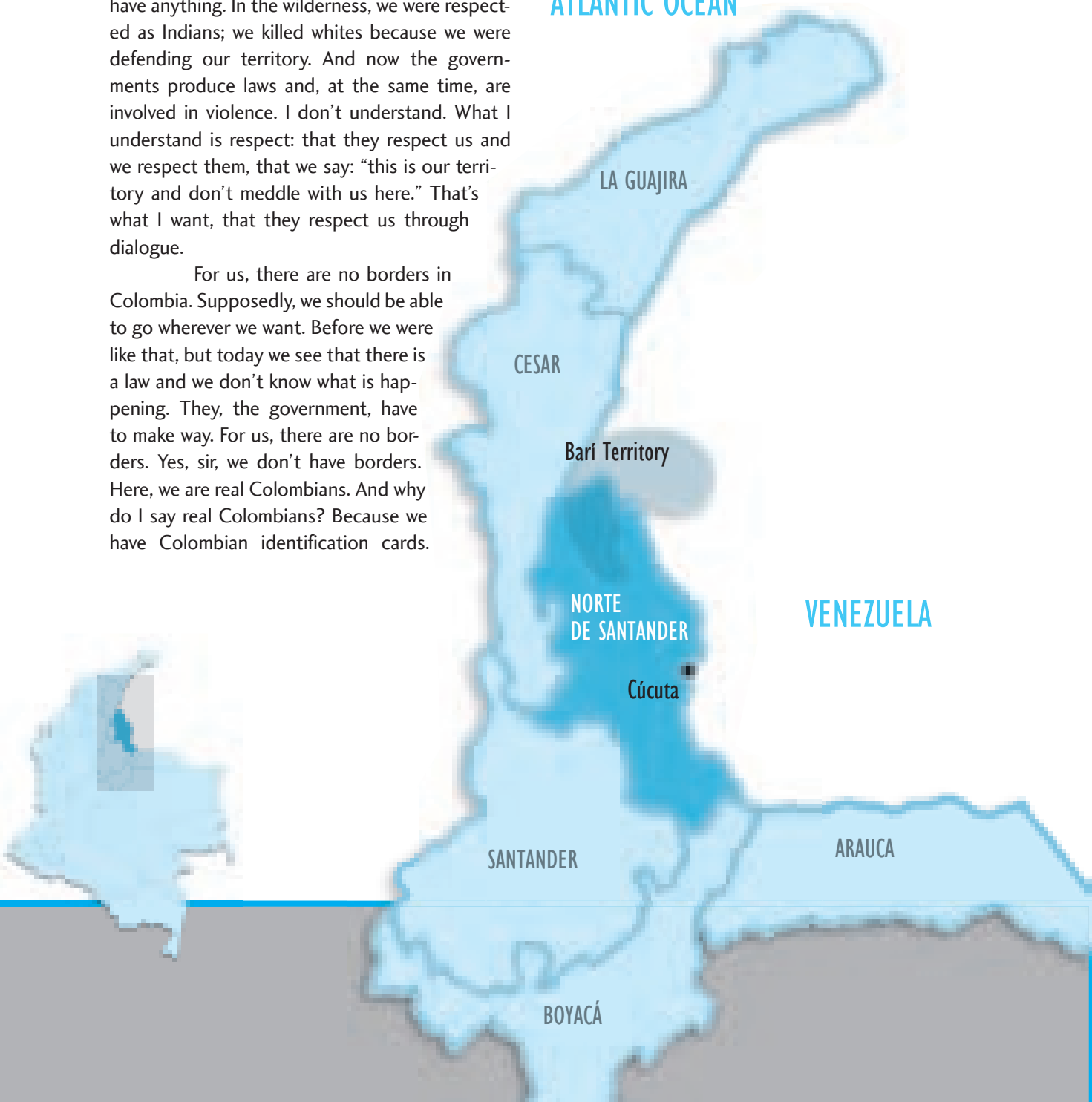
So I open my mind, and I begin to reflect, and I say: what are we doing, we who left the wilderness to become civilized and left without weapons to be killed? Yes, unarmed, because we don't have arrows to shoot anymore; we don't have anything. In the wilderness, we were respected as Indians; we killed whites because we were defending our territory. And now the governments produce laws and, at the same time, are involved in violence. I don't understand. What I understand is respect: that they respect us and we respect them, that we say: "this is our territory and don't meddle with us here." That's what I want, that they respect us through dialogue.

For us, there are no borders in Colombia. Supposedly, we should be able to go wherever we want. Before we were like that, but today we see that there is a law and we don't know what is happening. They, the government, have to make way. For us, there are no borders. Yes, sir, we don't have borders. Here, we are real Colombians. And why do I say real Colombians? Because we have Colombian identification cards.

But we can't go where we want happily, because the authorities themselves tell us that we can't go to certain zones. We don't understand that. The only place that we like to journey to now is Venezuela, the neighbouring country. There we don't have limits, we don't have papers: Here we are identified; we are motilonos.

Before they were afraid of us. But not anymore, because now everything is friendship, everything is "buddy," everything is normal. And he who is killed, dead remains. And that's what they have done to us.

## ATLANTIC OCEAN



### *When the violence arrived*

The violence arrived. But since I wanted to learn more, I did less. I joined a political party, the Unión Patriótica (the Patriotic Union); they told me to run for office so I could serve the community, and since I saw that it was easy for me to do so, I did it. I thought that the Unión Patriótica was the best place to be a politician within the government; I thought it was the best. Why? On one hand, I lacked experience. I thought that if you didn't do harm to anyone, that was good. I had affection for the municipality. I thought that, as a councilman, I could teach the community and learn with them, work with them. But it was a lie. It turned out to be the opposite. As people say: "the gun backfired."

And when the violence arrived, they looked for me so they could kill me because I was going to run for councilman of Tibú. But I didn't do anything for myself (to help myself) because I'm easy going and I don't have problems with anyone. That's why they created problems for me and sought to kill me. Those problems are still killing me, the same ones.

### *I fled; I went to another community*

Then the violence reached out for me; it sought me out to kill me because I was a guerrilla, an accomplice. They said that because I belonged to the Unión Patriótica, I was a guerrilla. But I didn't carry a weapon. I was just involved in politics, just like the government is now. That's what I wanted to be. I've never worn a uniform, never in my life. I'm simply a pure Indian motilón, of pure blood. I respect civilization, but they don't respect me.

So I escaped. I went to another community and stayed there a year. I left the kids behind. I would send messages and people would tell me: "they are doing fine, the motilón Indians, but the violence has taken over your lands, because they say you are a guerrilla."

I went with another old Indian, someone who lived with me in my house. But being

away, he died. He saw that the violence was looking for me and he got sick of it and he died for my sake. He accompanied me – for what!. We arrived at the community of Shubacbarina – the two of us alone. Our territory had to be protected, and that's why we went alone. It was better that the rest of the family stay behind and protect the territory.

We arrived at the Río de Oro (Gold River). The old man and I stayed with the Indians there for a month. And he told me that those people (the paramilitaries) were bad, that they would kill me. And I said no, that we were peaceful people, that they wouldn't kill us. We were Indians who had opened ourselves to civilization and that they should respect us because the law said that they had to respect us. And when the old man had told me all this, he died.

The problem was that I stayed alone with the Indians, with the community. With the community, I was fine. But it's not the same as having your family by your side. On one hand, I had good health, but my life was bad: all day I would be thinking, thinking of my children: because I have nine children. I knew that they were suffering for me, as I suffered, as everyone in the family suffered and we are still suffering. They (the Indians) protected me a lot. Why! But they protected me. For me, the only important thing was that they kept quiet. Their solidarity was in not saying who I was. Everyone kept quiet. If they (the paramilitaries) asked where I was, the answer that they gave was that "I went to another community, "he's far away working with another community." That's how it was.

### *I didn't return out of fear*

I stayed in the community. I didn't return out of fear, out of fear for what I had seen: near where I was staying, they killed around 30. So I felt nervous, and I still feel nervous. I was in La Gabarra (on May 29<sup>th</sup>, the day of the massacre). And for me it was incredibly ugly! My cousin transported people by canoe and was going to

collect boat fare. When they docked, the passengers got off and said “motilones, we will pay you later on, when we get home.” But the enemies were watching, and when the passengers arrived at the tank, they killed them; they killed those peasant farmers.

In La Gabarra, they took my cousin away; four of them forced him into a white van, pushing him. He didn't last two days; they killed him fast. With one more day, my brother would have saved him; the Indian *cacique* would have saved him. But when my brother went, my cousin was already dead. They had cut him into 10 pieces.

I had to speak out, search out the *caciques* and speak with the monsignor, the priest. Everyone spoke out on the radio, everyone sharing their opinion, because he wasn't a soldier; he travelled in the canoe, picking people up, transporting them, and collecting the fare. He worked for his sugarloaf, for his food. The family told them to return him alive or dead and so they returned him dead, in a bag. We said that it was the paramilitaries, and we formed a big group to go and talk with them, so they would hand his body back. So we brought him back and buried him in the community. The bones are there.

#### *Four years without leaving!*

I was there for a year when I decided that I had to go talk with the paramilitary commander so they didn't kill me. I had been there for a year, lying about in a house. And the violence said: “you can come home, but under no conditions can you leave the house to go walking about the territory.” They said that otherwise they would kill me: the only way I could go back without having any problem is if I stayed in the house quietly, as a prisoner, a prisoner for four years in my own house. Only two years ago did I begin to leave the house. I had spent four years without going out!

So when I arrived, I didn't arrive alone. At the roadblock, there were lots of paramilitaries so I arrived from a different route and didn't run

into them. I arrived with a young man who accompanied me from the other community.

So, the problem is this: I arrived and when I arrived, my wife appeared; I sent her to say that everyone should go to the house and wait for me there. And I told her that if the violence were there, she should tell the family to leave. At that moment, I was *confioso*<sup>6</sup> in God – the God who the grandfathers say protects us in every moment of the day – I myself spoke with the paramilitaries and a short while afterwards, they abandoned the house. I entered and felt great joy that they had left us alone. The kids and brothers-in-law were there. They threw themselves on me with joy and I said “Here, there is no violence anymore. (Untrue, the violence continues. And if not how are they exploiting the mine?)”

I had to change my name. Fine! I changed my name. But everyone still called me by my old name. The only thing is that they advised me not to leave the house, not to go to any other place. That we can't do; it's not right. The violence was very hard on me; it killed me live, spiritually. I didn't even work for the community. Nor did I work for my keep. Only the kids went out to work, to earn our food.

They told me to stay put, not to go anywhere. And the chief here also told me to stay put. I was here and then I was in the community at Caricachaboquira where I stayed for around four months. They told me to keep still, otherwise they would kill me.

#### *There were only problems*

When I was displaced in the other community, my kids stayed behind. The violence almost killed two of them: one of them was shot in the leg. The kids went down to shell a bit of rice and the paramilitaries opened fire. There were three wounded: a white man, my daughter and my son. A report of the incident was made to the authorities in Cúcuta. But I don't know how long the complaint has been there and no action taken! What happened to my daughter, it almost killed me.

And the violence entered my house. I lost animals: they killed two dogs and my mare. When I arrived there was lots of problems: I left behind my animals and the paramilitaries ate them. When I left, I had 80 cows; when I arrived, I only had 15 left. My family told me that the paramilitaries had ruined everything: "they are telling us that you are a guerrilla and, as we are all a family, we are all guerrillas."

The paramilitaries were there every day until they left. Sometimes they were there for eight days; sometimes a month. They came and went, mixing themselves with the motilones. And the motilones didn't say anything, because if

you told them to leave, then they killed you. You couldn't say anything because the threats were really serious.

When I was little, when I was in the jungle, I was really happy. We had races<sup>8</sup>, marathons. We've always done that: we always get together, 200 Indians, and spend around four hours racing. That's our joy: to run. That's what I learned to do and that's our way of expressing ourselves.

So that's what I want: that we continue doing what we are doing. The race, the marathon: we never stop doing what our ancestors, the old ones, handed down to us. With the same joy.

<sup>8</sup> For the Barís, "the marathons are events in which [...] the community enters into live contact with their territory and reaffirms the qualities and virtues of the speed of some members [...], deserving of respect and recognition." ([www.prensaindigena.org.mx/Informe%20Final.htm](http://www.prensaindigena.org.mx/Informe%20Final.htm)).





## Sofía\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
31 year old.	Barí Indian and teacher.	Her community has resisted forced displacement and lives within a limited space of its ancestral territory.

### *So the kids learn*

I belong to the Barí<sup>1</sup> community. At present, I'm working as a teacher, teaching Barí children. More than anything, I'm speaking in the Barí dialect<sup>2</sup> so the children will learn to speak our language and learn our history, our myths. It's so they know about our ancestors, the ancient ones and the wise men, and know everything the ancient ones said. It's so they learn to live like Barí.

We professors give classes on the most important Barí, about the Barí, the cosmology, the origin, the myths, everything having anything to do with our communities. We teach the culture, especially about what the Barí did, how the world began, the myth, the life, the origin of the Barí, how he was born and the history of the Barí people.

We want to preserve our cultures, traditions, myths and the spirituality of the Clean Eyes<sup>3</sup>, so we can defend our territory<sup>4</sup>, preserve our language and understand other languages too.

I'm 31 years old. I've always lived in my community and have wanted to serve it: I've wanted to help the Barí people. I needed to study. I studied first in my community until the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and then went to a city to attend secondary school. I wanted to continue my studies after I finished high school. But I returned because I felt

that rather than being in the city, I should return to my community to serve my people.

### *A way of living as a barí*

As a woman and a teacher, I know our teachings. As Barí, we feel important, as I do as a woman. But at the same time, we are faithful to our culture and have respect for the community and the ancient ones. We have respect not only for the community but for all our different organizations, so that we can defend our customs, our traditions, our speech, and thus maintain our identity as Barí. We also keep our ancestors in our thoughts, not only so we can talk of the nature of the Barí as people, but so we can live like Barí. We are not as we used to be: We've changed in our many forms of dress and in our being, but we still maintain the Barí identity.

My family are farmers who work together in the community, who work for the well-being of their children at home. They also put a lot of effort into ensuring the preservation of our ways as Barí: living in a family, in a unit, and also as part of the larger group. There's my father, my mother, my three brothers and my two sons.

I got married, but within the traditions of our culture, in community ceremonies. The tradition is that the chieftain conducts the ceremo-

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 They call themselves Barí, which means "people;" they are also known as motilonos. They currently inhabit the basin of the Catatumbo River, in Colombia and Venezuela. 2 The bari-ará language. 3 The Barí of Clean Eyes, imperceptible to white man's eyes, are beings who protect the Barí. They live in the jungle. 4 For the Barí, the territory *-Ishtana-* has a sacred and spiritual significance linked to their existence as a people: "Without Territory there are no Bari, without the Barí, the Territory is not conserved."

ny. He talks with the mother, with the son-in-laws, with the parents. If they are in agreement, he marries the couple in a ceremony with 23 chieftains<sup>5</sup>. I've been married with my companion for four years now. He's only married to me. Before he could have been married to five women. But today, it's very hard to support five women because it's too hard to support all those women and children. Before, it was enough to eat yuca, fish and plantains; but today, by comparison, it's not. You have to have clothes, shoes for the children and food. Before you didn't need money; now you need it. If a child gets sick, you have to be able to take him to the doctor, take him for a check-up, buy medicines... And, if there's no money, then how are you going to be able to guarantee your children's health?

Before, healing was done with traditional medicines; but today there is very little traditional medicine left because it's being affected by all the fumigation and the medicinal plants have been damaged. The plants, herbs, aren't any

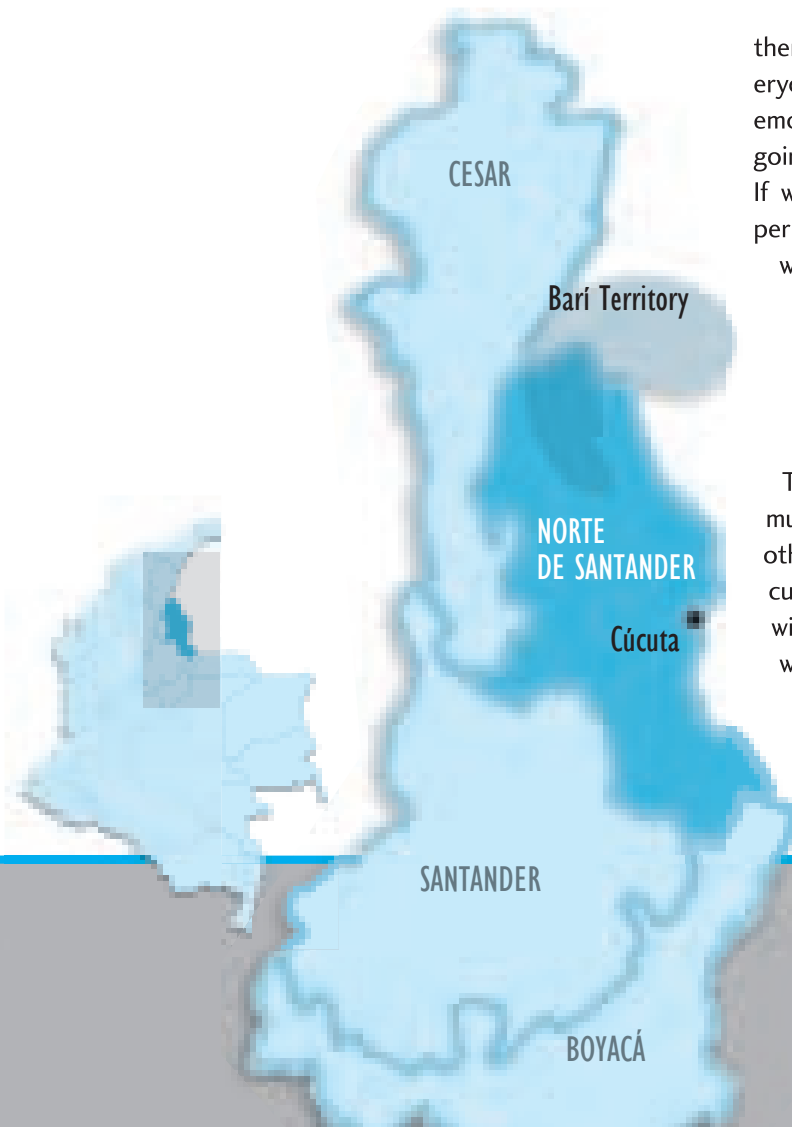
good anymore. So now we're trying to find a way to recuperate, to salvage the importance of that medicine.

We have to recuperate it. Today, a boy learns both about other peoples and also how to conserve what is ours within the community, so that he can help us preserve our medicine within the community. Restore it. Because before the ancient ones said that they didn't get sick, that with the Clean Eye they healed themselves. By comparison, there is a lot of sickness today and the Barí die from illnesses like tuberculosis, diarrhoea, vomiting, fever, and even cancer, because of contamination from mining.

As Barí we have to do as we did before: think like Barí and help each other. In the past, the Bari way was for each person to help his neighbour. We were united as Barí, man and woman alike, and we helped each other. As Barí women, we collaborated and shared food. If you didn't have yuca, another woman would bring it, for example. If a Barí man didn't have food because he had gotten sick, another Barí would hunt and share his food. That's what it was to share.

And there was love for everybody: there was no fighting; everyone was happy. Everyone conversed, talked, shared. There were ceremonies for fishing and hunting, because before going hunting you first had to ask for permission: If women went hunting for turtles, they asked permission first from the spirit. Before returning with the turtles they again asked the spirit of nature for permission.

Before they lived liked nomads, collecting wild fruits. But today it's not like that. Today they are limited in where they can go. Before they lived in different places. They were on the move, visiting different communities of Barí. They also exchanged things with other groups, as a part of an exchange between cultures, that included foods gathered in the wild, ways of hunting, fishing, the relationship with the wilderness, the practice of the marathon<sup>6</sup>. They were the same Barí, but still they exchanged the bow and arrow and song.





The Barí women dedicate their time to the arts, to making traditional clothes, to making mats, baskets, and, more than anything, to working alongside the men. They bring the wood, yuca and plantains so everyone can eat. The man plants the seeds and the women bring the food. At times, the women go with their husbands into the mountains to hunt. They accompany their husbands, but they don't hunt. They provide companionship so their men don't feel alone. The men kill the game and the women bring the meat home. It's not only the man who works, but the woman too: indeed it's the woman who works the most.

The Barí women teach each other. For example, the oldest Barí teach the young ones, so knowledge can be transmitted from generation to generation. It is the Barí way of thinking: they don't want their culture to disappear. Throughout history it's been that way, the adults teaching the youngest ones to make baskets, mats, dresses, loincloths. In the case of the men, to make bows, arrows and spears with blades. So that the Barí always think that way, so they never forget or lose their identity as Barí.

#### *They leave with the armed groups*

When I was a child, you didn't see as much violence as today. Before the children were, more than anything, in the countryside. It was very solitary there; everything was silent; you only heard the noises of the animals, the birds, the whistles. Everything was very silent in the midst of nature, the wind blowing... Today no, because everything has changed.

The children aren't the way they used to be. Today they all want a westernized world; they don't have the values that they used to have, when they were responsible and minded their parents. Today, they want to do everything they see. If they see an armed group they wanted to do the same things as the group. So they end up thinking of that other world and not what it is to be a Barí.

As a woman, it pains me that the children are with these different armed groups. You

know that sooner or later something is going to happen to them and you feel for them. As a mother, you expect you children to be by your side, instead of leaving to be with these groups. As a mother, it pains you that something might happen to them.

When young people go to the cities, the army tries to take them by force because they don't have their military service card<sup>7</sup>. The different armed groups also try to get them. They have taken several kids; several kids have collaborated with them.

The Barí community saw that this was a problem, and the organization – La Asocbarí<sup>8</sup> and the 23 communities<sup>9</sup> – saw this was a problem. So they began to talk among themselves. They reached an agreement not to keep working with those people (the armed groups) but that, instead, for the good of everyone, they would organize, take care of their own people, and work for the good of the motilón people.

For example, young people have to respect authority. They shouldn't go with an armed group if one appears. There is a ruling by the chieftain that they "shouldn't go to such and such a place." The community has to make itself respected. If someone doesn't obey the senior member of the community, he is breaking the rules of the community and will be removed, with a punishment from the spirits. The spirits will ensure that he is punished if he doesn't obey the chieftain. If he doesn't obey, he is expelled from the community.

The armed groups, having seen the situation, now they say that they are not going to say anything to the youth, that they will respect the decision of the Barí people.

#### *In a small piece of territory*

As a teacher and a woman I help with the process of reflection: what is it that we are seeing as Barí; what is it that we are thinking, and what are we going to do for the future of our children. When you look at the situation of the

5 Refers to the caciques (chieftains) *natubai* – of the 23 Colombian Barí communities. 6 For the Barí, "the marathons are events in which [...] the community enters into live contact with their territory and reaffirms the qualities and virtues of the speed of some members [...], deserving of respect and recognition." ([www.prensaindigena.org.mx/Informe%20Final.htm](http://www.prensaindigena.org.mx/Informe%20Final.htm)). 7 The military card is a document that shows the status of an individual's military situation. Military service is compulsory, though there are situations that exempt one from it, like for "Indians who reside in their territory and conserve their cultural, social and economic integrity." ([www.reclutamiento.mil.co/](http://www.reclutamiento.mil.co/)). 8 Asociación Comunidad Motilón Barí de Colombia (Association of the Motilón Barí Community). 9 Refers to the Consejo Autónomo de

armed conflict, what worries you most is the territory, the need to defend our children's future.

Because today we aren't taken into account. They say that in Norte de Santander, there are no Barí; it pains us when the state says that we don't exist in Norte de Santander.. And knowing that all this territory, from Pamplona to Venezuela, that all of it belonged to the Barí! It's all changed, because now we are all in one single place and we have a small piece of territory and, for that reason, we can't be moving from place to place. Before, you could walk to any territory without limit, and we lived without any problems; nobody had to tell us "don't enter." By comparison, we are very limited today; we can't be travelling from one place to another anymore. What limits the territory is the existence of the different organizations, the different illegal groups.

There are some Barí who have abandoned the territory, others no. Because they don't want to leave, because they say we are from here. They say it's just a small piece of territory, but it's the little we have and for that reason we don't want to leave. And the armed groups have come into our territory. They instil fear in us: you feel terror for what you see, including all the dead that you've seen. They make you move out of terror. But the Barí have always said that we cannot leave: Where are we going to go and where are we going to find food? That's what pains you as a woman, not having a place to live: where are you going to sleep?

We try, like those who have left and returned, to restore unity to our communities, to get others to return, dialogue, join us again, integrate. We have to stay in the communities, because later on where will the children go without mother earth? Our life is the earth. It's our life. Without it, we would be without anything, without anything to eat, clothe ourselves, sustain ourselves. Because we feed ourselves and live through her. It is through nature that we communicate with each other, we relate to each other.

What we want with the help of everyone, of my God, is the passage of laws to protect

Barí territory. And what is also important for us is maintaining the Clean Eyes, because we can communicate with them, do what they tell us, get help from them, so that (the whites) pay attention to us and recognize that we really have a culture. Because they say that we don't have a culture any more and that we are forgetting our culture, but that's a lie. We need to maintain our unity.

We are considering greater integration, of uniting even more. I realize that before we were very closed, that we didn't know anything about the outside world. But now we do, because everyone participates, everyone wants to be informed of what's going on. They also want the different Barí organizations to be united, for the different organizations to support each other, so that they are not completely alone as Barí, but can defend themselves through the organizations. They want to have different strategies that will help. They are trying to get help from within the community that will generate unity: everyone helping each other, so that between us, in Barí solidarity, we can understand each other.

#### *That's why we don't want them looking for oil*

One of our concerns is the drilling at the Alamo 1<sup>10</sup> oil well, because after having seen so much pollution and fumigation (of coca plants) in the Barí community, we know that this will harm us. For example, the oil exploration at Alamo 1 will bring sickness to the Barí and, not only sickness, but the contaminating of rivers and of the environment and the drying out of water channels. We've seen – at the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline – what happens to a river when the different groups blow up the pipeline<sup>11</sup>. You can't eat fish from the river because it's contaminated with oil. The fish even die. So for that reason we don't want them to explore for oil here. And because the company didn't ask permission to carry out prior consultations with us on the project.

The oil company doesn't even give us permission to enter the area. Before, we could

go where we wanted. We could go there without anyone shooting at us, there...as no problem. We could go from one place to another without restrictions. By comparison, as a result of Alamo 1, you can't go into the area these days because they shoot at you, or, firing around you, say "don't enter." For that reason, we can't cross over to the other Barí settlement.

Before, they even sowed mines to break the feet of our grandfathers, our ancestors. And that's what they want today: for the Barí to be finished off. So, we don't want them to explore for oil or kill us, because I've heard them say of the Barí: "there are very few of them, so let's kill them off with bombardments..." So we are worried. We want the different organizations to help us, including international organizations.

The army burned the Barí with planes. They sowed anti-personnel mines to get the Indians to leave, to make them flee from their territory so they could explore for oil. They burned the *bohios*<sup>12</sup> (communal houses) – even the houses, everything – to make the Indian flee to other parts.

Many people died, many ancient ones. My father told me that many died here, because it was a big group; it wasn't only Barí that lived here: there was another group of Indians – the Yariguíes – who were made to disappear. That's why we don't want them to explore for oil.

We see, for example, that the United States has its eyes on Colombia's riches. So the Barí ask themselves: They took oil from Tibú, and that wealth, that oil, where did it end up?; Was it for the benefit of Colombia?, they ask. That's why they don't want oil exploration or for the oil to be taken abroad, to other countries, like the U.S., for example. So they look at the need: They can take the oil, but it should be for Colombia. They don't want other countries to take it.

Tibú should have good roads, good homes, good everything: it should be without poverty and with good jobs. But the Barí see that Tibú has sunk into misery, with poverty and roads.. and still they want to explore more! So

that pains the Barí; they ask themselves what will happen in this country.

They don't want them to explore for oil, because they say that this is Barí Territory. And it's true, because I've noticed that when they drill for oil a drought follows: the earth doesn't produce as it did before. By contrast, when there is no exploration, you see nature in all its joy and its harmony and you are connected to it. But when they extract oil, you don't see that.

### *The pain of seeing so many dead*

It pained me to see what happened in Catatumbo. I've seen people bloodied and tortured by the different groups: the AUC, FARC, and the different armies that operate there. There were armed clashes, and many dead there in the area of Catatumbo: people bloodied, tortured, their throats slit. I've seen it because I've been there, because I was there during the fighting. I've seen wounds that pain me as a Barí woman; it's painful to see so many wounds up close.

It happened to me. We didn't know what was going on when this clash broke out between the AUC and the guerrillas. We had just arrived at the Catatumbo River when...this firing and these shots! We almost ended up in the middle of this shootout. I was really worried for my son; I had to find him. We were with other companions and then they detained us for three days, without giving us any food for three days.

I was wounded in a leg, but it wasn't a deep wound, just a small one... but yea, I was wounded and I had to cover the wound with the leaf of a liana, just like they taught me: that when you have a wound you have to cut the leaf of a liana and cover the wound with it, try to staunch the bleeding with the leaf. No one came to my aid. The paramilitaries didn't let you go anywhere.

They were killing people, they were pursuing the guerrillas. They came to us and said: "stop" and something else like that. My son was en route. So we stayed another day and then walked down below, walking with our companions until

12 The *bohío* (communal house) determines the social organization of the group that inhabits it; it can house up to 100 individuals, all of them with relationships of alliance.

we arrived at the community, which was far away. And at the community, they asked us what had happened, what had happened to me, since they knew that there had been a battle in the road and that we had had to stay there with those people, and they had been worried about us. They were very happy to see us, but our family was sad, all of them, asking us what these people had done in the battle. And with a heavy heart I told them what it was like to see so many dead and to see all that. It was a lot to experience and you ended up wondering why things were like that.

We talked about it: that yes, they had to respect the Barí Indian population. We also talked about how when a Barí goes to a city he shouldn't be labelled as a guerrilla because none of us belongs to any group like that. We say that they have to respect us because we are not a member of any of those groups, because we are Barí with our own language, way of thinking and speaking. We say that as Barí we are the owners of these territories, those that were so big before!

The soldiers treat us badly, they think badly of us and insult us. They sometimes say our boys are guerrillas. That hurts us. It hurts me as a woman that they say these kinds of things of our sons; it hurts me as a woman that sometimes they tell the young women that they are collaborators of these people (the guerrillas).

The different armed groups that have appeared in the communities: What have they done? They impose themselves. They say: why do you have to speak your language? When there are road blocks, the military make the Barí Indian shut up. They tell us not to speak our language, even though it's our language. The guerrillas and the paramilitaries do the same. But there are other organizations as well that ignore us and don't respect us when we speak Barí: for example, groups that want to discriminate against us.

So you start to think as a woman, as a mother: that for the sake of the children, the youth, that it shouldn't be like this. It's a lack of respect for the Barí. Before they respected us.

### *This terror should be no more*

What causes us so much pain as Barí is that our children are being filled with all the violence around them; they see the violence, the displacements, and they won't be able to get it out of their heads. That creates pain in a child: seeing all that, these massacres, this violence... because as Barí, we've been displaced, we've been driven from our territory, and all these killings and displacements that have been inflicted on us hurt us.

It's what we don't want: that they displace us. This terror, this violence shouldn't exist anymore. The state should take care that there aren't massacres and displacements among the different ethnic groups. For example, when someone comes to you and says: "in such a place, something happened..." you feel pain for that person. I say: "So what's the state doing? The state should help, help to educate the country.

The president (of the Republic) himself has to take us into account, respect Indians like the Barí and the other groups. Because from what I've seen of the president in Bogotá, he isn't concerned for the Barí. We know they want to finish off the Barí. If we see that that's the case, as brothers we should make the state recognize us and ensure that we are respected by the different groups, including the military.

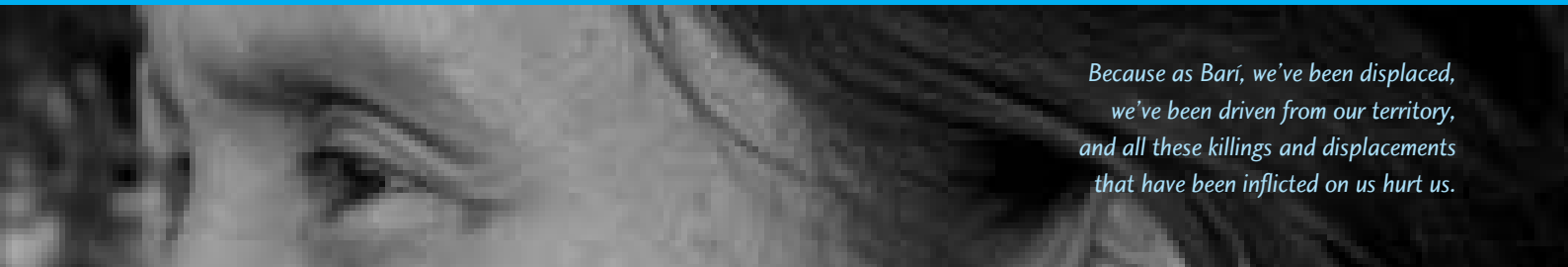
So the Barí say that Uribe<sup>13</sup> should talk to the different groups from his position as leader: with the self-defence forces, the military and the guerrillas. They should come to an agreement; there should be a dialogue; they should talk amongst each other so there isn't so much violence, but that instead there is peace.

So I say that that's what the president should worry about: he should wake up. He doesn't feel the pain of a homicide that happens in our area; he doesn't feel the pain of a death there. But what you see everything that has happened pains you.

Because what we want is spirituality. It hurts us that we people are killing each other; it hurts us. We people don't want children in our community seeing it: all those problems, the vio-

lence, the deaths, the massacres. We don't want that to be instilled in the children, we don't want it to be instilled in them, because if a child sees all that terror then his mind fills up with it. So we

don't want all that to happen around our community anymore; we don't want to be displaced, or suffer so much violence. As Bari, that is what we want.



*Because as Bari, we've been displaced,  
we've been driven from our territory,  
and all these killings and displacements  
that have been inflicted on us hurt us.*

ATLANTIC COAST











# Ester\*

## AGE

54 years old.

## BACKGROUND

Peasant farmer and housewife.

## DETAILS

Forcibly displaced from the department of Bolívar. Survivor of the El Salado massacre in El Carmen de Bolívar.

### *As a child i worked*

I'm originally from El Salado (Bolívar). I always lived with my father, my mother, and siblings. Of the siblings, we are two women and eight men. My dad was a poor peasant farmer but he tried to teach us the important things. My grandfather on my mother's side had cattle, mules for rent, and lots of land. My grandfather was the one who was generous with his kids, like always helping my mother and my father. He always helped with something, like giving my father some cows for milking. My grandmother, the mother of my mother, was submissive, that's what my grandfather said. And the mother of my father was the dressmaker of the town; she was the best tailor around. Having been a widow since her youth, she supported the other kids. My family live to a ripe old age, because my dad is 83 and the mother of my father died at 96. She only died six years ago.

During my childhood, I worked; I helped my father hang tobacco, and helped my mother stack it; I did the household chores, went to the forest and drew water from the well.

My dad like to *dar juete*<sup>1</sup>: he would hit us for any misbehaviour, but he hardly hit me: he hit my older brother more, because he was disobedient. My dad always treated the girls differently. For example, he never wanted the girls to

draw water from the well, because, for that, there were more than enough men.

My mother had so many kids – every two years she had a child – and I was the oldest of the girls. So I had to help with the deliveries. And when she was on a diet (after the pregnancy), I had to pound the corn to make corn balls, arepas. My legs grew strong from pounding so much corn... ja, ja!

I finished primary school; in Carmen I studied two years of high school and then I returned to El Salado. I remember that my father had a donkey that he sold to buy me a typewriter. They sent me to El Carmen (Bolívar) to stay with my aunt and study. The others didn't want to study. It was me that liked to study: I completed the second year of high school and then I fell in love.

My father liked to give orders. I was a very alert girl; I obeyed my father, but I liked organizations. After I completed my second year of high school, I set up a school, because I liked to work: I didn't want to be supported by someone else, either by my father or my husband. I always sewed or did something else to maintain my independence.

### *There were two incursions there*

Life before the first displacement was really good, because you could live very peace-

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 Spank.

fully there; everybody grew tobacco, yuca, rice. It was a big town: there were three tobacco companies buying up tobacco. Everyone there cared a lot for each other and almost everyone was like family, born and raised in the same place. Everyone there is a peasant farmer who, at least, has one or two cows, has some animals. It's a wonderful place to live, there's water and now there's an aqueduct. My husband, for example, has a 53-

hectare farm there. He had one, anyway, because it's still there.

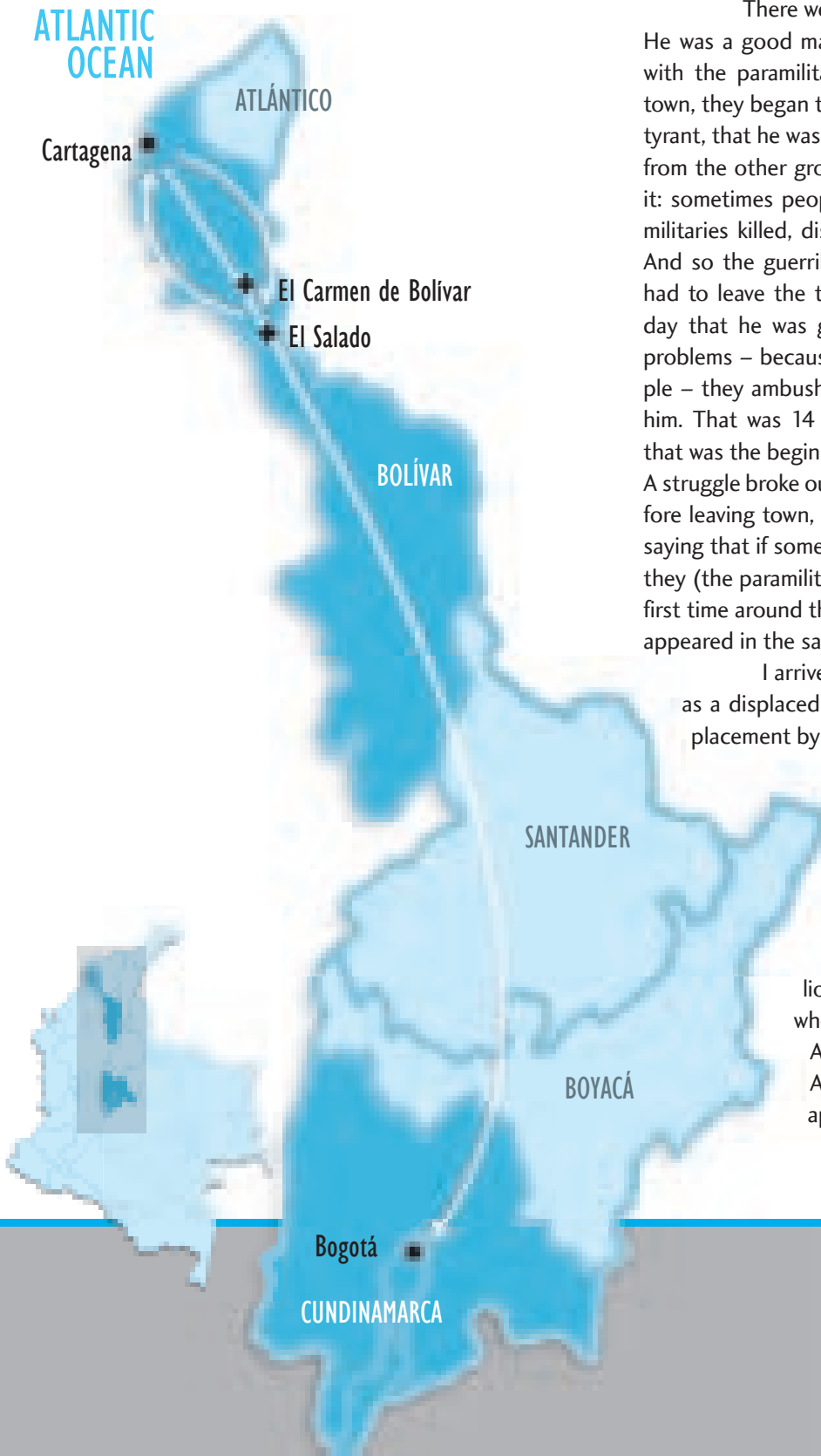
The displacement in Salado happened because there was a rich man, the rich man of the town, who was said to be a paramilitary. He had lots of land and many farms, and it was said that he made his workers work very hard and then, when they went to collect their pay, the workers would disappear or be killed.

There were people that knew the story. He was a good man, but then he made contact with the paramilitaries around there. So in the town, they began to say that he was a bad man, a tyrant, that he was... I don't know how the people from the other group, the guerrillas, got wind of it: sometimes people complained that the paramilitaries killed, disappeared and buried people. And so the guerrillas threatened him, saying he had to leave the town, but he didn't leave. The day that he was going to leave, after so many problems – because they had killed a lot of people – they ambushed him on the road and killed him. That was 14 years ago, and it is said that that was the beginning of all that later happened. A struggle broke out between the two groups. Before leaving town, the man had cursed the town, saying that if something happened to him... Then they (the paramilitaries) appeared openly for the first time around there; and then the other group appeared in the same way.

I arrived in Cartagena from El Salado as a displaced person, because the first displacement by the paramilitaries happened in

1997. There were two incursions: one in 1997 and the other in 2000. In

1997 alone, they killed four people: the teacher Doris; a boy that was half-retarded; and two others, Ede-lio's father and Alfaro Padilla, who was a director of a Junta de Acción Comunal (Community Action Committee) and was disappeared. He was taken away



and never heard from again; later, it was learned, he had been buried far outside the town.

We returned three months later. There we stayed for three years, with problems, until the biggest incursion in 2000<sup>2</sup>: that was when they massacred 100 and some people. Four hundred men under the command of Carlos Castaño<sup>3</sup> came into town, helped by *La Gata*.<sup>4</sup> In that massacre, two of my cousins and an uncle were killed and the entire population of the town was displaced; some went to Barranquilla, others to Cartagena, other to Carmen (de Bolívar) and still others to Sincelejo.

When they committed the massacre, they warned everyone to leave town. The army itself said that we had to abandon the town. There were so many dead that they sent in cars so you could throw your *corotos*<sup>5</sup> in them and so leave. That's how everyone left; not a single person remained behind. From el Carmen, came dump trucks and other trucks organized by the mayor of el Carmen. You put your *chocoros*<sup>6</sup> in them.

The town was left with a stinking smell. During the massacre, they dug a mass grave and dumped 17 (cadavers). A few days later – I was in Cartagena – I went to look for my mom. It was a reeking pit: the cemetery, the town, the dead...! I entered behind the Red Cross truck and I looked along the highway where cars passed and I could see the dead, the pieces of limb, already eaten by *el golerero*.<sup>7</sup>

There was a body here, another there. And that was just at the entrance to town, before arriving at the cemetery – because the cemetery is before you get to the town. At the cemetery itself there were around 50 bodies that still hadn't been buried. Ay, what a stench, what foulness!

We entered the town. There was another mass grave there of 18. People had abandoned the town after the massacre; they left three days after it because they had to bury the dead from their families. There was no more room in the cemetery so they put 17 in a patio next to a well, which was called the "trap." The body of my cousin Redondo, from Acción Comunal was among

them. They summoned everyone into the plaza and Redondo was there along with his mother. The mother embraced him and said: "don't kill him, kill me." They killed her as she embraced her son. They lifted up her clothes and said "do for us what you do for the guerrillas." A 7-year-old girl was killed; they put her in a bag and drowned her, and they killed an uncle of mine, who never got on the wrong side of anyone.

That killing broke my heart because he was the most saintly guy in the world. They took him away and they killed him because he didn't know how to talk: they asked him something and he got scared. My uncle liked to fight his roosters. So they made him pretend he was a fighting cock, and then they killed him. They made the old men dance; they got them drunk and then killed them. I was told they even stacked people on a table, one on top of the other, and then sawed through them with a chainsaw.

They created a calamity... it was barbarous! My brother-in-law avoided the plaza, hiding instead with his wife and a son in the woods. He heard the paramilitaries as they walked by talking. But he lost his little, 5-year-old daughter on the highway. She was taken to the plaza, and there she saw everything.

In their haste, my parents hid in a big house. There were various people hidden there, because the paramilitaries went from house to house breaking down doors and pulling people out. So they were there when a phantom plane – one of those that the army has – began to fire from the sky. A bullet entered through the zinc roof and pierced a man who was near them and killed him. His blood flowed onto a little girl that was there with her mother. When that had happened, my parents walked out of the house and to the highway, and the child stayed behind on the highway. Then she was taken to the public square where she saw all those things. She saw so many things that she ended up traumatized. She has gotten psychological treatment since, but she hasn't improved. She performs poorly in school, and she's in terrible shape overall.

2 On February 18 and 19, paramilitaries raided the principle town of the parish of El Salado and executed 46 peasant farmers after torturing them, slitting their throats and sexually abusing several women. Source: Colombian Commission of Jurists. Colombia, human rights and humanitarian law 1997 to 2001. Volume 1. Bogotá, December 2005. In: [www.coljuristas.org](http://www.coljuristas.org). 3 Paramilitary commander. 4 Nickname of Enilce López, coastal businesswoman with great political power who is involved in the betting business. Arrested in 2005 for misappropriation, money laundering and homicide, she is linked to investigations of massacres perpetrated by paramilitaries in the departments of Sucre and Bolívar. 5 Household items. 6 Household items. 7 Vultures.

Near where my brother-in-law was hiding with his wife, the paramilitaries passed by talking, and, apparently, one of them said: "I don't want to do this to these poor people," and the other: "faggot, if you don't do it, they'll kill you; you can't say you didn't do it. Because the bosses will screw you!"

Though I wasn't in the plaza when (the paramilitaries) entered, people shouted that they had arrived: "Everyone run and hide!" As my mom lives on the corner of the same street where the people were screaming, my brother and his wife were there and their kids warned my mom and my dad that the paras had arrived.

And my sister-in-law stuck her head out and saw that they were breaking down the doors, the shop windows and everything, and she said: "let's go, they're coming this way!" and as the gardens there have wood fences, they had to break down one of the fences to escape to another lot. And my dad ran in one direction and my brother and his kids in another, because, as my brother is a *gordo pipon*<sup>8</sup>, he couldn't jump: so they had to break the fence and escape running as the paramilitaries approached. The paras said: "get in line, get in line!" Everyone had to get in line and march to the plaza. And when they told my brother to "get in line," that fat man jumped into a gorge and went tumbling down, his sons and his wife behind him, and then escaped into the woods. Because if he had gotten into the line, they would have killed him. His brother-in-law got in line and they killed him... "An excellent man!"

#### *The whole town had to leave*

Then the whole town packed up and left. Three days after the massacre, the mayor began to send trucks to pick up the *chocoros*, the household things. He sent trucks to get all the canoes. A cousin of mine had around 100 head of cattle that he took to El Carmen. But four days later, the paramilitaries came and stole them. He was the richest person in the town.

My mom and dad left with 20 head of cattle, we left with 2...We took the cattle of my mom and dad to Cartagena. But as we ended up spending two years there and it was the whole family – father, mother, brothers, nephews – we had to rent a house. So we ended up eating or selling all of the cattle. At the end of two years, we didn't have anything, everything had been finished off... I told my mom to sell the cows and buy a lot or rent something there in Cartagena. But she didn't want to, because she said that they weren't going to stay there. She was going to return to her home again...But everything was finished off, the business and everything!

#### *Cleaning up the town to be able to return*

Our displacement lasted two years. Given that people were struggling to survive and didn't get any help where they looked for it, they got together and formed an organization. We created it in el Carmen de Bolivar and had several meetings. Asodesbol<sup>9</sup> was created, an organization formed to pave the way for the next return to the town in 2002.

The mayoralty of Carmen didn't want the return to happen just then, but it did get some help in food and machetes from other organizations so we could clean up the town. We got the supplies and went back to the town to fix it up. It was *enmontado*<sup>10</sup>, you couldn't see the houses. But we cleaned up everything. It took us a couple months. In 2003, 150 families returned to the town. Including the outlying hamlets, it was around 300 families.

#### *Again, the worries*

We started all over again. La Red de Solidaridad Social (the Social Welfare Network) got us a tobacco-growing project. The peasant farmers did very well with it, but then people began to disappear again. There were rumours that the groups had returned, and people began to be afraid again. Then some people disappeared and

reappeared dead. In 2004, the army appeared and people began to get frightened again, because the army said that those who had participated in meetings were subversives. They began to say that my husband, who was the president of the organization, collaborated with the guerrillas.

He would go to the Defensoría del Pueblo (Human Rights Ombudsman Office) and denounce the abuses committed by members of the army against the community and a lieutenant *se la montó*<sup>11</sup>, so in the end, the army and the paramilitaries end up sending him a warning in 2004. This time they set up a roadblock and burned five motorcycles. They sent him a message saying that he had to leave town or, if not, he would leave feet first! We got frightened and we left again. At the time, they weren't displacing everyone in the town, just families. We had to return to Cartagena with nothing. We left behind everything, even the brood of chickens. He had two cows, he had chickens... all this was left behind.

From Cartagena he kept working for the benefit of the town. Other members of the Junta de Acción Comunal (Community Action Committee) arrived in Cartagena as well. A year after he arrived in Cartagena, they arrested him. But it was as if they were arresting the most dangerous guy in the world: the Navy, the CTI<sup>12</sup>, and the Fiscalía (the Prosecutor General's Office) turned up and raided the entire block. Around twenty men in vans, cars and motorcycles arrived at the house, entered from behind by the terraces and arrested him. As his wife, I said that they should let me make a call to the Defensoría (Human Rights Ombudsman). I asked why they were taking him away – a man who had helped the community and gotten things that people, the displaced, needed. They didn't let me make the call. They searched the house, because they said that he had things there. They turned the mattresses and books upside down and still didn't find anything. At the time, he was with me as well as two small grandchildren and a daughter. They brought hooded people forward in front of the kids so that they could identify him, so they could say "This is the man." And they

took him away. They told me to shut up because I was screaming. As they were going to search the house, I told them that they didn't have to do so, that I wanted to go with them. Because they end up planting things in your house.

### *Hopefully they won't find us*

They arrested him in Cartagena and turned him over to the Fiscalía (Prosecutor General's Office). A few days later they handed him over to the *Tenera*<sup>13</sup> and, when they couldn't prove anything against him, I called the Defensoría (Human Rights Ombudsman) and an ombudsman immediately gave him assistance. But he remained imprisoned for one month more and they accused him of aiding the rebellion. He was released from prison on June 20, 2005 and we came to Bogotá, where we are now.

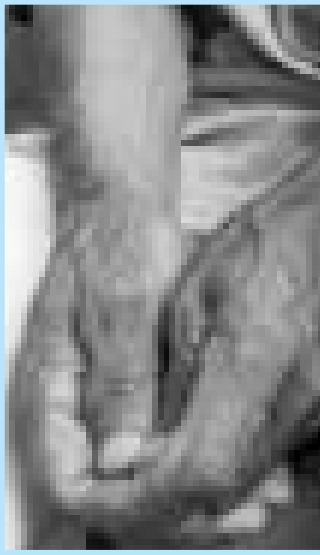
We were advised that the best thing would be to come here, the capital, where we know people and we could get help. Also because it's far from the town. "Fleeing, fleeing...!" as it's said. Hopefully they won't find us. Here in Bogotá, it's the cold that has been hardest of all. I miss my other kids, those that stayed behind there, and my family: my mom, my dad, and the environment that I was used to with my people all around me. Here, you don't have neighbours. You stay all cooped up and, when you say that you are displaced, people look at you strangely.

On a typical day, for example, I get up, make breakfast for my daughter and granddaughter. My daughter goes to work; my granddaughter to school. I clean the house, make lunch, sew – because I do sewing to earn some money – go to meetings. That's how I keep busy the whole day.

We went to look for provisions at the Social Solidarity Network and got a supply for three months. Then I asked for a continuation, but they didn't want to give it. I've gotten moral support from the nuns. But no financial assistance. My husband has some connections in Bogotá and sometimes they help him out a bit. The state doesn't worry about us: you survive as you can.

11 Had a grudge against him. 12 Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación de la Fiscalía General de la República (Corps of Technical Investigators of the Prosecutor General of the Republic. 13 Prison of Cartagena.





## Blanca\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
64 years old.	Mother of three sons.	Former government official and community leader.

### *Traveling the country to be with the indians*

I arrived in La Guajira to work with the Indians and the Ministerio de Gobierno (Ministry of Government)<sup>1</sup>. I worked in various regions of Colombia with the Office of Asuntos Indígenas<sup>2</sup> (Office of Indian Affairs) and with many Indian communities: the Embera-Catíos; the Cunas in Chocó, Quibdó and Antioquia; the Guambianos in Tierradentro; and the Ingas and Coreguajes in Putumayo. Then they transferred me to the city of Valledupar, where I continued to work with the Arhuaco Indians. Then I went to work in Riohacha. That's where I fell in love with the father of my children, who is Indian and has a Wayuú mother and an Arsario father. He was assassinated.

When he was still alive, I worked with him, but when they killed him, I was left alone with my two young children. I struggled and worked alone. As a nurse, I saw many Indians, giving them saline solutions and visiting Indian communities in the countryside. I also had my animals and I earned money from that to support my children and give them an education. With those earnings, I also built our house, which had to be abandoned, discarded in La Guajira when I had to leave. That was my situation. I didn't suffer hunger. I had a very big house and I lived very well with my children. I worked for them and I educated them. If I

had been left alone by the death of my husband, I, nonetheless, kept on to help my children advance in life. Then I suffered displacement and my daughter died and I had to leave for Bogotá, leaving my house behind and abandoned.

### *When I was a little girl they punished me with work*

My parents loved me a lot. Before people were very affectionate, very warm. They also made you work so, in the future, you would be a strong person. My parents paid for my studies, but when I failed a year of school, they punished me. When I failed the third grade of primary school, for example, my parents sent me away. It happened during the season when they fattened the pigs so that on Christmas they could kill them and offer food, not only to the family, but to all the neighbours. It was for a party that would include fritters and custard. Those things, that kind of celebration, was done before. But it's no more; it's all come to an end.

Back then, for example, we would kill a pig and have a great time. But it was really hard for me when I failed school that time because they sent me away. They bought me clothes and all that, and I thought they were going to send me to Tambo (Nariño) where my grandparents

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 Currently, el Ministerio del Interior y Justicia (Ministry of the Interior and Justice). 2 Refers to the Oficina de Asuntos Indígenas (Office of Indian Affairs), today converted into the Office of the Ministry of Interior y Justicia.

lived and where we went every year after Christmas Eve. Instead, they sent me to cook for 25 labourers in the forest. I was just a little girl of 11 years old. I had to wake up at 2 in the morning, make arepas (cornmeal rolls) and beans. Neither my uncle nor anyone else, helped me, because my father was mad and said it was my punishment. They didn't hit me, or anything like that, but they punished me with work. It was a hard Christmas, being there. But then I came back home. It was my experience.

## ATLANTIC OCEAN

I lived on the banks of a river. My mom would give each of us a different chore. She would say to me: "Rake the gardens, gather up all the garbage and burn it." We did our work, put the house in order, and always kept everything clean, with the plants in the garden well-watered. She

would say to us: "okay, now I'm going to give you what you need to make a

stew, a picnic in the garden, or wherever you

want to do it. It was my mom's

way of doing things. It wasn't like things are today where they reward you with other things, with objects.

Back then they rewarded you with food or by saying "go to the river and swim as long as you want." And it made us really happy, because we weren't usually given freedom that easily.

Sometimes they would make us cut wood, fix up the garden with a mattock or collect oranges. They would go to town and they would give us lots of chores so we wouldn't have time to play or get in fights. They would also make us milk the cows, gather up the horses, and remove ticks from the cattle... Then when my father would arrive, we would make cheese with the milk we got from the cows. Removing the ticks wasn't done, like today, with chemicals. Back then, there practically wasn't money for that. My dad and mom would tell us everything we had to do:

"if you do this, I will reward you." If they had money, they would buy us a dress, some shoes and it made us very happy that we were going to wear new clothes.

When I finished primary school, they sent me to study in Pasto (Nariño). There I finished high school, which at that time didn't finish until the third year. Well, it was very hard because from there they





sent me to Villa Garzón (Putumayo). I had been there only a few days when I fell in love with a boy. I was 13. The boy was young; I was still a little girl. But they got him and sent him to do his military service in Pasto. With that, everything came to an end. We were separated and lost contact with each other. It was a really tough blow for me. Then they told me they were going to send me to study in Bogotá, where I have a godmother. And they sent me away.

I arrived in Bogotá, and was there only a few days when I got sick. They told me I had tuberculosis and they sent me again to Putumayo and then to Pasto. There they did an X-ray on me and told me that it wasn't tuberculosis. So I took the X-rays back to Bogotá where they were examined by a specialist, who also said I didn't have tuberculosis, but that I had acute asthma. I stayed here in Bogotá for awhile at my godmother's house and got a job in a pharmacy. I worked in several pharmacies here in Bogotá.

That's when I sent several résumés to the Office of Indian Affairs of the Ministry of Government, that was in the 8th with 8th<sup>3</sup>. When I was chosen, I went to work in Turbo with Indians, because I really like Indians a lot and my great desire had always been to help them. I would say: "I wish I had money to help them and give them everything." But God granted me the privilege of working with them.

#### *I was a very cheerful woman*

It was marvellous. I would go to Indian communities without fear and without being threatened. For example, my two daughters would be invited to parties, to normal birthday parties or the special parties for celebrating a 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was a very cheerful woman: I would go with my daughters and we would dance. I would accompany them until late, or, if not, leave them in somebody's charge and return alone. When I went to Indian communities, I would take my daughters with me so they could swim in the streams. The Indians gave me special treatment: they were very

attentive with me. They would hang hammocks for us. Though I really went to work, we would arrive as if we had been invited.

I worked in many hamlets and communities: in Campana, El Molino, Monguí, Zapamana, with the Indian community in Poroin, in Cabo de La Vela, Umaki, El Cardón, and in many parts of the upper Guajira, including Bahía Portete and Nazareth. I got to know many communities and everybody knew me, because I spent time with my Indians, and, especially, because I was the most cheerful woman in the world, sharing with them and helping them. If there was a sick person...? I would go to where the person was and, because I'm a nurse, help them. I felt like the most cheerful woman in the world, because I lived with my daughters. I worked and brought money back to buy them what they wanted. My daughters wouldn't trade me for anything in the world.

My children's trust was very lovely for me, because if they had a girlfriend, for example, they would tell me. My oldest son – who is 25 – was 15 when he fell in love with an Indian, who is now the mother of my grandchildren. She was 14 then, and he took her from her house one day and took her away... That's when I began to have problems because her grandparents were part of a very violent system. They said that if you took away a niece or a granddaughter, you had to pay for her. My son said to me: "I'm in love," but he never told me that he had taken away the girl. One day, the girl's mother arrived, bringing the girl with her. "I bring you my daughter who has been harmed by your son; you have to pay and wait for the grandparents to return." Because according to the law there, sometimes it's not the parents who charge, but the most powerful ones – the grandparents. And if they have money, it's the grandparents who pay. So I was supposed to pay for the girl, that girl who became the mother of my grandchildren. They charged me 20 million pesos<sup>4</sup>, necklaces, mules, horses, all that; but, I couldn't afford it. So I paid 7 million. Still, with that, I had to go to meetings attended by many people, including relatives who went to talk and

<sup>3</sup> Refers to the previous headquarters of the Ministry, on the 8th street with 8th avenue (carrera) in Bogotá.

<sup>4</sup> A dollar is equivalent to some \$2,200 and a euro, to some \$3,000.

threaten. One of the uncles, for example, was very, very tough. He told me that if I didn't pay, then he wouldn't be afraid to seize my son and disappear him. I called my son. He got really upset, because he was just a child, and I advised him. I told him: "my son, I will do whatever possible to go out and find the money needed to pay for the girl, don't worry." The other son is still a minor, and, for that reason, he doesn't understand problems. He is very cheerful and he tells me things: "this happened to me...I have a girlfriend, I went to a dance with her, I'm going to the beach." It's the same with my daughter who is also a minor: "I don't want to get married, I want to be on my own," she says. They tell me things, they are very trusting. They tell me everything.

#### *Mami, mami, protect me!*

We lived in Riohacha. My daughter was going to turn 16. They killed her on May 26. She was going to turn 16 on December 25. Her father had been killed the year before on June 13. My daughter was buying and selling clothes, sandals, hammocks, backpacks so that she could make money and buy a commemorative for the anniversary of her father's death. And she was travelling from Riohacha to San Juan del Cesar and to Valledupar.

She had already made two trips, when an Indian introduced himself: "I have two hammocks with a double face and if you want, you can take them. If you sell them, you'll earn good money." With that, my daughter got excited; she felt really happy and carried off the hammocks. That's when she came and said to me: "Mom, I'm going to go to the party of the Wayuús in Uribia, in the Guajira. Wait for me. I'll take the hammocks, and if I don't sell them, I'll leave them with my grandmother in San Juan de Cesar." My daughter went with the hammocks, some pants, and some leather sandals that she had bought cheap to be able to sell. She left that day, saying good bye to me. I said: "my child, don't linger there because you're very pretty." I took her face in my hands: "Don't go out alone; it's very dangerous..." As if

I knew, as if I had guessed what would happen to her. "I'm earning money so I can buy the commemoratives for my father," she said. She said good-bye and she left. That was a Wednesday. Thursday, Friday and Saturday came and went ...My other daughter, a football player who was 14, also wanted to go to the party in Uribia, in the Guajira, because she liked football and micro-football. So early on Saturday, my sons and the 14-year-old left for Uribia. My youngest daughter stayed behind. My 16-year-old daughter *Suca* – they call her *Suca* – had not come back. She had not come back. The other three went to Uribia and returned on Monday.

On Saturday, I woke up very early. It was May 26, precisely the day when they killed my daughter. That day; I woke up early, feeling really bad, sad and sick. My body hurt as if I was a drunk. But I still didn't know what had happened. As the day advanced, my three children arrived. That day, an Indian also came to the house. She said to me. "ay, señora Blanca! They killed some people there, including a really pretty, long-haired girl with Indian features." I got scared; I was frightened. I was wearing flip-flops – I was dressed like you are around the house – and, without worrying about that, I went running to the police with my son. I went to the police in Riohacha: "How was she dressed, what was she like physically?," they asked me and I began to cry and scream. Everyone said to me: "Calm down, we don't know if it's her or not."

That night I drank lots of coffee and couldn't sleep. The next day, I called my neighbours. A lady and a prosecutor from the prosecutor's office went with me to Cuestecita. We arrived and I was carrying a photo of my daughter, modelling (for us)...It had been eight days since the photo was taken. They said: "Take her to the girl who washed (the deceased.) We looked for the girl there – nobody had information, they didn't know, they didn't know, they didn't know... Then when we arrived to where the girl was who does the washing (of dead bodies), she told us: "yes, that photo is of the girl I washed"...

She told me that my daughter had been buried, because they had found her there in a quarry, in a well...“They brought her here, and the same day we held a funeral for her. People participated and helped out. We set up candles for her, and we had a mass because she was really a beautiful girl. We saw that she wasn’t from just any old family; so the town helped out a lot.” And no one, no one knew who my daughter was; they didn’t know anything. So they called the women of the night in Maicao, in Barrancas, and in Hatonuevo to ask if they had seen the girl in a bar. But the women said no, that they had never seen the girl anywhere before. They hadn’t seen her and they didn’t know her.

So they left her there. According to the law, they should have taken her to the morgue. She was killed on May 26, and they didn’t take her to the morgue, but instead buried her that same day at four in the afternoon. They gave her a beautiful coffin; I had thought she was buried in a plastic bag, but no: they buried my daughter in a coffin and put that in a vault. They didn’t put her in the ground; they put her in a vault. I told people: let’s go visit her. I didn’t want to see the lady who dressed her and all that. The whole town said: “ay! leave her in Cuestecita.” But I didn’t want to because I live in Riohacha and wanted to be able to see my daughter without returning to where they had killed her.

Because they broke her hands, they cut her breast, they raped her: they did everything to her. It wasn’t just one man, but several. Because a friend of mine was there. He realized they were raping her. She screamed and called out: mami, mami, protect me; mami, help me, mami help me!” That’s what she did: called out to me, pleading that I help her so they wouldn’t do anything to her. But they were without compassion. They shot her twice in the head, cut her breast, tortured her. Three months later, my friend told me that he hadn’t known it was my daughter. If he had, he would have let off some shots to try and make them leave her alone. Because she cried for help for a long time and nobody...Who was go-

ing to help her? They thought there were many men involved...because they say even the SIJÍN<sup>5</sup> was involved.

After they found my daughter – because they buried her and we had to ask in Maicao for permission to disinter her – we removed her. We removed her six days after she was buried in Cuestecita and took her to Riohacha. But my daughter was already very decomposed. I uncovered her because I wanted to see her before she was buried again, and the whole neighbourhood pleaded with me to bring her into the house. But I couldn’t do it because she was too decomposed. We buried her again six days after she had been buried in Cuestecita. You’re supposed to hold a wake for nine days. We started on the day we found her and for the following nine days, relatives, including brothers from the Indian side of the family, maintained the ritual.

#### *They called me*

And when the ninth day was up, people started calling to threaten me. They told me to leave town, that they were going to kill me. “But I haven’t done anything! It was me whose daughter they killed. Why should I have to leave?” Then people came around, asking about the lot. I think they were people sent to ask who had killed my daughter. Being courteous, I answered: “I don’t know, she was found dead far from here in Riohacha. I don’t know who did it.” Nothing more. But the day came when I lost my patience. I had to go to Maicao to give my statement. I wasn’t going to declare against anyone in particular, because I didn’t know who it was. But I went to Maicao both for that and to get humanitarian aid from the Red de Acción Social (Social Action Network). I had to travel several times, because the electricity would get cut off and I couldn’t give my statement. The computer would get shut off.

And when I would arrive at night, they would call my neighbours on the phone, looking for me, to tell me that I had to accuse those bums, that I should denounce them and punish them.

They would say that I shouldn't be foolish: they deserved punishment...I would say: "I'm not going to make a statement to punish anyone, because I don't know who did it." They would say: "fool, declare, say who it was so they are punished," and I would say: "I don't know, I don't know" because really I didn't know. They called constantly. Finally, they called me on the phone to say: "hello, the Fiscalía (Attorney General's Office) needs you, they need you to declare, to see if you know who any of the murderers of your daughter are, so that we can put them in prison. The Fiscalía has that right to punish them." I would say: "How would I know if I wasn't there when my daughter died? I wasn't there when they killed her. If I had been there, they would have killed me too. And I wouldn't have let them kill her. But I don't know who did it, I don't know what armed group did it, and so I don't have any reason to say that it was this group or that." I didn't know. But when they called me, I was afraid.

Then they started calling my sons. They would tell them they shouldn't be foolish, that they would give them a weapon to revenge the death of my daughter. That's what most made me leave, because my sons were still young then – now one of them is 20 years old and the other 19 – and I was really afraid that they would be convinced, being so young. I was afraid they would be given weapons and that they would fire them and then they would be taken away. Who were those people? I have no idea, because it was my sons who told me about it. But I became a skeleton; I didn't eat or sleep, but only thought, not about my daughter anymore, but about my sons, that maybe (those people) would take them away. And they kept saying to my sons: "come on now, we'll give you weapons so you kill those bums," without my sons knowing who they were. I said to my sons: "My God, don't listen to anybody."

#### *In a bus bound for bogotá*

That's what made me come to Bogotá. In the Fiscalía (Attorney General's Office), in

the Red de Solidaridad (Social Action Network) and in the Defensoría del Pueblo (Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman) there were relatives of those who had killed my daughter. I knew who they were; I knew who had been there. In the Fiscalía in Riohacha, in the Personería (Office of the People's Defender) of Riohacha and in the Red de Solidaridad of Riohacha, there were relatives of those involved. I had gone to deliver some papers – because I was already thinking of coming here – and that's when I saw some women there who were relatives of those who participated in the death of my daughter. And that frightened me and I said: "this is not for me." I went to the Defensoría, and they were there too. So I didn't get any help there, I didn't ask for any, because I was very afraid, very afraid. And because of that, I told my friends I was going to Bogotá to deliver some papers, but I didn't tell them anything else. I sought out a way to leave. I asked around, I got some help and I got together the money I needed. Then I left with a little bag, travelling in a way that no one would know where I was going, travelling by bus to Bogotá.

I couldn't bring anything with me. I only brought the bag and a bit of clothes, nothing else. If I had brought with me a television set or a stove, that would give people an idea of where I was going and what I was doing. I came alone, with nothing, leaving my kids behind in Riohacha. And knowing that they were alone back there, I suffered here in Bogotá.

I got some work here in Bogotá, and I went to stay with some people who had given us their phone number. When my kids went on a trip to Cabo de la Vela in La Guajira, those people had given gave them a ride and had given us their phone number so we could call them if we were ever in Bogotá. And, me, in my audacity, went to their house. They put me up and gave me shelter, but I never told them that my daughter had been killed, because they would have thrown me out. People here are really afraid. I suffered a lot being alone and I cried at night. They would hear me crying and say to me: "What's wrong?" And I

would say to them: “no, I have a headache” and they would give me some pills, which I had to take. Because what else was I going to do? To not take them would have meant that something else was bothering me. From there I would call my children – the people gave me money – and I would ask them how they were. I would call them every day. I wanted to call them every hour, every two hours, to find out what was happening. At night, I couldn’t sleep.

### *I lived with fear*

At that time, I was working as a leader of an organization called Anmucic<sup>6</sup>, an organization of women. People there helped me bring my children by plane to Bogotá. The wife of my son and the grandchildren stayed behind in Riohacha.

But before bringing my kids to Bogotá, I had several problems. One time the Comisión de Justicia (Commission of Justice) called me to give a statement. I was going to the Commission by bus, when someone hit me in the head really hard and stole my papers. I fell from the bus, lost consciousness and was taken to the hospital. The señora at the house where I was staying had lent me some shoes and a jacket. That was all stolen too. I don’t know if they had attacked me to steal my papers, because [at that time] the organization was being persecuted and many of its leaders had been killed. After that I went back to the house, which was in the Quinta de Santa María<sup>7</sup>. On the way, I begged for money, because I had lost my change purse. I had no idea what had happened to it. I asked people for money, and they gave me the 2 or 3 thousand pesos<sup>8</sup> that it would cost to get back to the house. The señora there was angry: She asked me why I had to return so late at night. But I didn’t respond because I was staying for free.

I stayed there for a while. Then Ilsa<sup>9</sup> called me to offer me some assistance. But I couldn’t take their help either. Because near their office, a dark woman wearing a jacket pulled a gun on me. She asked me: “What are you going to do

at Ilsa?” and I told her that I wasn’t going to Ilsa, but that I was going to meet a señora who was going to give me work taking care of her child. I pretended that I didn’t know anything about Ilsa, that I didn’t know anything. Then they took me away in a van. I ended up staying at some place for five days. They took me away blindfolded. They took away my identification card and the 2,000 pesos I had for bus fare. And at that house there, there were lots of strange people. It was like in the countryside, but I couldn’t say where it was. There was a stream, and lots of dogs, weapons, and strange people...They asked me questions, but I told them I didn’t know. They told me to give them the telephone number (of where I was staying), and I told them I didn’t know, that there was no telephone where I was staying. They asked me what the name of the neighbourhood was, and I told them I didn’t know. They told me I was a fool: how could I not know where I was staying.

After five days, they let me go. They left me near Soacha, above some hills; I don’t remember what the neighbourhood is called. They took me above the hills blindfolded and let me go, leaving me without a peso. A man there gave me 500 pesos and another gave me some money and in that way, I got a little money together. I told them. “I’m lost.” But I didn’t want to tell them what had happened to me because I was afraid. Then I went to la Quinta de Santa María. There the señora told me that she didn’t want me in her house anymore because she didn’t like people who stayed away for so long at a time. But I couldn’t tell her what had happened, what they had done to me. I couldn’t tell her any of it. I couldn’t tell her because it frightened me. So the señora told me: “Stay here for three more days and then leave.”

I looked for a friend that I had known since my youth; I looked, I looked for her on foot, and went to where she was living. She told me to come stay with her, that I could help her cook and that she would give me food. I went alone because my kids were still living in Riohacha. I stayed for three or four months.

6 Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas Campesinas y Negras de Colombia (Association of Black, Peasant Farmer and Indian Women of Colombia). 7 Bogota neighbourhood. 8 A dollar is equivalent to some \$2,200, and a euro, to some \$3,000. 9 Instituto Latinoamericano de Servicios Legales Alternativos (Latin American Institute of Alternative Legal Services).

One day she sent me to pay the gas bill in Madelena<sup>10</sup>. I went there to pay the gas and two guys came alongside me, one, dark skinned, and the other, more white. They didn't take my money – I had already paid the gas bill – but they asked me what I was doing, where I was going. So I told them: "I came to pay the gas bill," but I was afraid. Then they showed me a paper and asked me about the señora Nora Cecilia, who went to Spain, to Canada and about the *doctora* Leonora. I said. "Why do you ask me about them." They said: "Because we want to kill those sons-of-a-bitches!" I said: "no, I don't know anything, because I don't live there. I live here." They said: "We know where you live, so tell those bums to take it easy, to stop causing problems. Otherwise they will have to deal with us." They showed me an identification card from Anmucic, our organization, and they showed me the identification card that I had lost, that had been stolen from me. It terrified me! I said to myself: "Those people are the same (as the others from before) because they have my identification card..." Then they named another women who worked with the organization and said to me: "tell that woman to take care, not to be such a son-of-a-bitch."

Then I went to the place where I was staying. I didn't say anything about what had happened, because she would have thrown me out. I tried to comply with the terms of living there, to not stay out late, because I didn't want her to throw me out before they had brought my kids. And, out of fear, I didn't go back either to the Colectivo (the Collective) or to the Comisión de Justicia (Commission of Justice) or to Ilsa.

I stayed at the house and other things happened, but they weren't that big a deal. They did send some written messages to the *doctora* and said some things to her, so she had to leave Bogotá. But I said to her 'why don't you bring my children here.' That's when they brought my children, and I ended up with them in Bogotá. My grandchildren didn't come until later, until sometime afterwards, because there wasn't money to bring them just then. But that move to Bogotá

was really hard for me: the persecution and all that...I lived in fear...it seemed they were going to kill me. I didn't go out, with all that they had said to me...it was my turn, they were going to shoot me! It was really hard. I never mentioned any of it to my children: I didn't want to make them more nervous than they already were. But I suffered, I suffered alone, and that was the hardest thing of all: to not be able to express or tell anyone about it and get it off my chest. No, I suffered the pain alone.

I also suffered thinking that something was going to happen to the children, though nobody knew that they had left for Bogotá. The children had left the house empty and left everything behind. But that too created problems, because people have since stayed there, staying for nights and leaving us debts, both from water and electric consumption. They have since been ordered to pay the debts, so I don't lose the house. The electric bill alone had risen to 800,000 pesos. So, thank goodness, as they say, they are paying off that debt.

#### *I came to suffer problems*

I came to Bogotá to suffer problems because I was a person who had lived really well in Riohacha with my children. I never was hungry, although I have been hungry here. The first days here were good ones, but when my kids arrived, it was humiliations, mistreatment, and bad food, terrible food. Sometimes we could eat only once a day, and, for the kids, that was very hard, because they're Indians and they're used, for example, to the free and easy lifestyle they had in Riohacha, not like what they find here, where everything is prohibited.

There they would spend their time playing football. They would be invited to the beach, and because they were good players, they would be sought out and taken to some hamlet or nearby town to play. So coming to Bogotá was a very difficult change for them, and for the littlest children, my grandchildren, it was very hard

because they were taught to eat traditional food, which was el bollo<sup>11</sup> with friche<sup>12</sup> and they missed that: the friche, goat's milk, rice, stewed goat, rice with smoked meat. So, for them it was very hard, because they would say: "here they don't sell goat, there's no goat here? why don't you buy us some goat?" and you would say to them: "no, but in the next few days, in the next few days..." Still, we could never buy it for them. Because where is the money going to come from? How are we going to buy it if here everything is more expensive, if the meat of that animal is so expensive? There, it wasn't a problem, because our relatives were there, we had friends, and they brought us goats. You would go to the settlement and eat an animal.

My kids are now big, but raising my grandchildren here in Bogotá is very difficult because it isn't the same atmosphere; they don't have the same freedom that they had there. For example, on a Sunday they would go to the beach, they would go to the river, they would fish or go to a pasture and see the goats or go to a settlement where an uncle or some other family member lived and spend their Saturdays and Sundays there. Here it's different, because if you don't have a peso and you go out with your child, he immediately wants ice cream, chocolates, sweets. And, if you don't have any money, how are you going to give him anything? It's not that you don't want to give it to him, it's not that you're selfish. It's just that life here is very different from life there.

It affects me not to see my children as they were back there: for example, during Decembers, everyone in the neighbourhood was together; we closed the streets and we didn't just dance, because that alone isn't joy: we also prepared food. People would bring me animals, chickens and I would kill them and prepare a good soup on the 25<sup>th</sup>, which was the birthday of my daughter who died. I was very happy being with them during those times. They would say they were going to stay in the house. But they would go out onto the street and visit neighbours to chat and enjoy their Christmas, and things were like that any

old day. They were very cheerful; they would go to the beach and everything. Coming here is like clipping their wings, because they can't have that freedom here that they had there, they can't say "we're going with such-and-such" and you feeling relaxed. Here, no. It's also very dangerous that they see them in the street and...

### *People discriminate against you and offend you*

There are many good people here, but there are also very rude people who treat you badly, who discriminate against you and offend you. Because there are many people here who are very offensive, who, if they know that you are displaced, discriminate against you. For example, the kids. School for them has involved terrible suffering because they don't have a school uniform and the teachers discriminate against them for it: this child won't go on the trip or can't participate in the event because he doesn't have a uniform; this child won't be allowed to sit in on class because they didn't buy him a uniform. I spoke to the rectors and told them: "I am on my own, and I haven't been able to earn enough money to buy those uniforms." And they say: "But work, buy one, because we can't take this child on trips when he is the only one who doesn't have a uniform." For me it was really painful to see the kids arrive and start to cry. That didn't happen in Riohacha: the teacher or the director wouldn't say that to us: If we didn't have the uniform? No, there everyone was treated equally. "Why are people so strange?" my grandchildren asked me. Why are the cachacos<sup>13</sup> here different from the Guajiros?" As the Indians there are so united, the kids are unhappy seeing the treatment they get here.

The most difficult things here are, more than anything, the customs, which are not the same as there. To come to a new land – it's not that Bogotá or Colombia are new: every territory, every region has its own customs, its own tradition. Still it was very difficult for me to come here, to a place where we had to acquire new traditions

11 Corn pastel wrapped in leaves of dry corncob. 12 Goat meat and entrails stewed in slices, typical Wayúú plate.

13 Name that people from the coast give to people from the interior.

and customs. It was very hard. And that's been the most difficult thing for me.

I suffer a lot, I suffer for my daughters and my sons. To see that they don't have work, that they are desperate and want to leave. I don't want them to return to that land; I don't want my children to be far away from me again. It seems that they will be killed, that they are going to do something to them...They are full-grown men, because one of them is 24 and the other 25 and the girl is 19, but for me...I would like my children to be well set up so I don't suffer, because I suffer a lot on their account. Seeing them, it's me who suffers the most. I never cry in front of them, they never see me crying: "What's wrong mom?" "Ay, I have a headache!" I'm worried, but I never tell them that, because I don't want to torment them and make them suffer.

#### *They don't even feel pain for the victims*

Life here is very difficult. For example, I feel here as if my wings had been clipped. I can't take flight, because I feel less... it's not that I'm incapable of doing things, but that I feel very insecure. I used to be a very open person. I participated in meetings. I was a person that was invited, that spoke, shouted, laughed. I'm not the same anymore. Why? The feelings, the courage: all that has receded, it's disappeared. I can't express how it's disappeared in me. It's as if my courage had gone to sleep or had been taken away from me ...And it's the same thing with my kids: I see that they're not the same as before when they were active, dynamic people who might say to you: "let's go do this..."It's like they were asleep, as if they were all dimwits...But it's because of the change in atmosphere: we don't have the same life here in Bogotá as we had there.

Nothing has improved here in Bogotá. I have to pay rent, but when I don't have money, I'm worried because I'm a señora that no one will give work to. The (unwritten) law here is that young people are hired for restaurant work. Experience and youth are required, even if it's for kitchen

work. And if you want cleaning work, they worry that you might fall and that then they will have to pay for someone who is already old. So, for me, nothing has improved. Because I'm not working here. Because of my age, no one gives me work. My kids don't have work. And that some should say things have gotten better for me...What has gotten better for me? What? Absolutely nothing! Sometimes you're wanting, but you can't say to anyone: "I'm hungry." Because who is going to give you a mouthful of food? If I was in la Guajira, yes, because I have family there, people who will give you a piece of meat or goat's milk. When you raise goats and have fish at hand you don't go hungry. But here you suffer from scarcity!

You arrive from there extremely afraid, with fear: you can't say anything. I'm a person who didn't know how to speak, and I can't say: "I went to the Personería (Office of the People's Defender) to give my statement and that I made it as I should have," because I didn't get (good) advice from anybody. Instead, they told me "don't say anything, don't say anything." And so I said that I didn't know, that I didn't know who had killed her. But it was out of fear. Still, because of that, the Personería says that I don't appear in their system because I didn't make a declaration as required. Up to now, I've never received help from Acción [Social] (Social Action Network) or from any other institution. I haven't even gotten the monthly assistance in provisions and rent. I've gotten absolutely nothing from the government here in Bogotá. People that I know have helped me out some: not with thousands of pesos, but with 10,000 or 20,000. Still, it's not been enough money to cover my family's needs here in Bogotá.

I believe that they haven't felt our pain or appreciated us as victims: on the contrary. They say that we have to forgive, that we have to forget. But neither the president nor any of his judges or advisers have suffered what, as a mother, I have suffered in losing a child, in the way they killed my daughter. ...Because I had a meeting in the vice-president's office in Bogotá with



Francisco Santos,<sup>14</sup> Luis Alfonso Hoyos<sup>15</sup> and a companion who is now in Canada and who is part Arhuaca, as well as my companion Leonora Castaño. And what they said to me is that there had to be forgiveness, that one even had to forgive Judas. As a mother, I stood up crying. I shouted at them, saying that because they hadn't suffered the killing of a mother or a daughter, they didn't

feel other people's pain. Because that's what happened to me: they raped my daughter; they broke her hands so she couldn't defend herself; they tortured her, they cut her chest and did everything else that could be done and it wasn't just one man, but many. There were three cars and several men involved in the assassination of my daughter!





## José\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
23 years old	Chimila Indian, father of a girl.	Displaced from the department of Magdalena.

### *We were happy*

Before the displacement, I lived with my family in a hamlet called La Pola in the parish of Chivolo (Magdalena). We were happy there and we lived peacefully. You could go where you wanted and you could work in farming or ranching. We had a plot of land with crops and some animals, and we were content.

The hamlet of La Pola was colonized by peasant farmers, or, like we say, whites, but my mom lived with a *cachaco*<sup>1</sup> man, who had a small parcel of land. We considered him part of the family. They (the cachacos) are respectful of our traditions, because we teach them that the Indians love their traditions and he who doesn't love it has to at least respect it. The whites don't say anything, they are present during the ceremonies and accompany us, though they don't understand the language<sup>2</sup>. The ceremonies are in our tongue.

### *Weapons impose their law*

But when the armed groups began to arrive, they also began to control people. In the first place, they arrived imposing their laws; so people had to collaborate with them. That's the way the time passed. Collaborate with them, for example, by cooking their meals, alerting them if you see another group in the area...When you don't know

what's going to happen, you're ignorant. Their behaviour towards us was good, very good; you had to treat them with seriousness and respect and, if you didn't, you had problems. But they didn't mistreat people. They were people *del monte*<sup>3</sup>. Then paramilitarism began to appear. Things began to change, because they began to impose their order. They began to kill and to seize the little you had.

The armed groups don't respect the Indian communities. They say everyone has to be involved in the war, that there are no preferences, that there are no preference of any kind. As such, the armed groups will terrorize anyone and you have to collaborate with them, even if you don't want to.

In the first place, they (the paramilitaries) kill you for collaborating with the guerrillas. There were people who perhaps helped the guerrillas. The paramilitaries would then pursue the brother of that person if he had the same last name. That's how it went. Many people had to deny their surname, because if you had the same surname, they would say: "this person is the same thing, a guerrilla, imagine..." If you had a brother or father who helped the guerrillas, then the whole family were guerrillas: everyone, the women and children included. And displacement arose from that – the displacements that have been very numerous around here.

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 Person from the interior of the country. 2 The chimilas – E'te ennaka (native people), as they call themselves – speak ette taara (the language of the people), from the linguistic family Chibcha. 3 The guerrillas, who have their camps in the mountains.

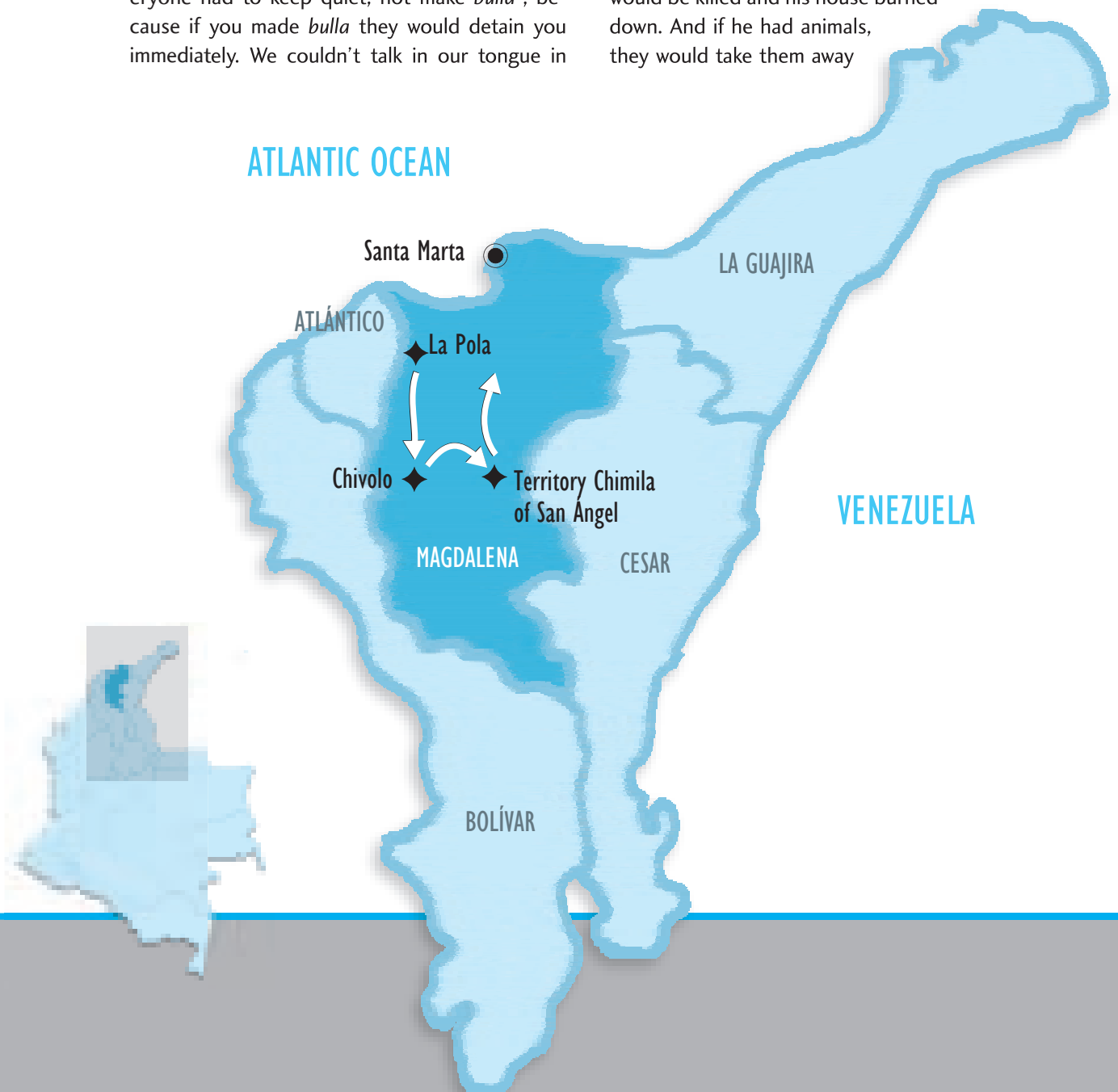
In La Pola, for example, when the armed groups arrived, we couldn't even go out at night. The peasant farmers would communicate amongst themselves and would say: "no, they're not around here" and then our fathers would go and buy provisions, afraid. There were times when they would prohibit any movement: if they discovered a peasant farmer had bought something, they wouldn't believe that it was for his personal use but would say it was for the guerrillas. They would seize you and kill you just for bringing a purchase home, even when the purchase was something small. Sometimes we were in need because we couldn't go out and buy things.

When paramilitarism appeared in our area everything changed; it changed totally. Everyone had to keep quiet, not make *bullá*<sup>4</sup>, because if you made *bullá* they would detain you immediately. We couldn't talk in our tongue in

front of them because they would tell us to speak clearly so they could understand.

#### *With a deadline for leaving*

When they first began to come into the area they would say that they were guerrillas, or the army, and when they began to kill people, we realized that they weren't guerrillas. The guerrillas have the custom of settling in with families in their homes, of staying there. Night would arrive and they would still be there in the homes. The paramilitaries would then pursue them there and a battle would break out. So the paramilitaries would say that the owner of the house was a collaborator, a guerrilla, and that if he didn't flee, he would be killed and his house burned down. And if he had animals, they would take them away



and then use tractors to loot anything of use to them. The crops were left in their possession.

Then they would bring in people to live on the plots. They would take land and, in that way...They would take possession of everything, of the farm, of everything there. The people who stayed there, the people that they put there, were allies, *cachacos* brought from the outside. They didn't grow crops, but began to work, to organize the farm for grazing. They would bring in cattle, bring in all the cattle that they had taken from other places.

The same year that the paramilitaries arrived in La Pola, we left. We called them "The Nightmare" because they would arrive killing, they would chase, seize and kill people...Everyone was terrified and became sick; people would run and get sick from fear! There were people who, out of fear, would jump from cliffs and drown; they would get the shivers and fever from fear.

When the paramilitaries gathered the fathers of the families, they gave them a 15-day deadline to leave town "and if you haven't left, you already know that we will *mochamos*<sup>5</sup> your head!" We practically couldn't sell anything, because our plot was fenced in. Some of the animals died and those that didn't we had to sell quickly and cheaply. Eight days after their arrival an evangelical pastor said that he wouldn't leave. So they killed him. And they already had killed a lot of people before they killed the pastor.

They were like a bacteria, spread out over everything. They would arrive at any hour: in the morning, at night, and burn the houses down. The peasant farmer would get frightened when he saw them come and would flee running; the paramilitaries would burn the house and everything else they found there. They would take away the animals: the birds. Whatever was at hand, they would take: if the farmer had cattle on his land, even if it belonged to someone else, they would take it.

We had 17 animals on our farm, including five milk cows. Apart from those, we had other animals there that belonged to a man 'al partir'<sup>6</sup>;

and we had to hand those over to him. Left behind were the yuca and corn that we weren't able to collect.

When that happened, in 1997, I was 14. They came armed, with uniforms, like an army, kicking and pushing people. Whoever they ran into on the path, they would club or kill. Then they would dump the bodies nearby. Before the guerrillas inhabited the area, but the guerrillas didn't abuse the peasant farmer...that's the thing.

When the paramilitaries were around, you practically didn't inquire about the dead for fear. There are things that you don't want to remember, painful things. There were people known in the hamlet, who weren't Indians, but civilized people, white people, as we say. From there, after they ordered us to leave, we went to the Sabanas de San Ángel reservation, in *Issa Oristuna*<sup>7</sup>. We were there for three years.

After we left, they kept killing. They killed two elderly people that hadn't even told in advance to leave or anything. They arrived at their house and assassinated them. They arrived looking for their grandson and killed them. They (the paramilitaries) say they didn't do it on purpose. But the truth is that they killed them because they wanted to kill them.

They killed children, pregnant women. They didn't kill anybody in front of us. As a family, we were in one place, and they would go and attack other families in other places. We heard the stories that's all: "they killed so many in such-and-such a place." They didn't leave anybody alive; they even burned the houses. It inspired fear: you could hear the *plomera*<sup>8</sup> there. It sounded horrible; you could feel the earth trembling! It's ugly.

I saw many that were shot and killed, but it was said that they also seized people and cut them to pieces while still alive with *rulas*<sup>9</sup> and knives. I didn't see that.

There were people who were threatened, people who until then had never had any problem. But it's said that those people are still being pursued. They can't return. They will return, but already dead.

4 Noise, commotion. 5 Cut off. 6 As a partnership, between the owner of the animal and the person entrusted with looking after it. 7 Issa Oristuna (land of new hope), created in 1990 in the municipality of Ariguani (Magdalena). 8 Shooting. 9 Machetes.

### *We've suffered, but it's calm*

After our displacement here, our life has been very difficult. We've suffered from everything, from the food, the clothing, everything. We're affiliated with an EPS<sup>10</sup> for our health, but sometimes they don't see you when it's necessary; we've had companions who've died.

We make a good appearance, because my dad has always been a coward in terms of those things: he would always tell the groups that he couldn't allow them to come to our house, and he has taught us to work. He works too. As a result, we haven't suffered any physical abuses, but we haven't had stability either. He had been working there for 13 years, only to end up with nothing, to have to start all over again, especially with respect to the crops. It's really tough, when you have to do work on land that's not yours.

On the reservation, the land is communal and all the Indians share it. But as everyone has decision-making power, you have to wait and see what the group wants to do and you can't, as an individual, take any decision on your own. It's really difficult to make progress, no matter how hard you work. When the land is not yours, you can't put animals on it. But we did grow things: we were able to have crops again.

As the paramilitaries were still roaming about very *guapos*<sup>11</sup>, killing people, my dad said it was better that we leave, because maybe they'd give us problems for being from La Pola. So we came here, to this place. They didn't ask us where we came from; they knew. They didn't threaten us directly. We could bring the basics: clothes and some '*chismecitos*'<sup>12</sup> from the kitchen. We went directly to the farm when we arrived. It was 2001. The main building was empty and we moved in while we made ourselves a house. As the project had donated some houses, there was an unoccupied house and they told my dad that we should move there. Now we are all spread out; only my brother is living with my old man there. Then, the same project donated some *palma*<sup>13</sup> to make a traditional house and there was some *palma* left over. As I already had a female com-

panion, they gave it to me, and with that, I made my house.

But this land is very poor for farming and full of pests – it has a lot of fungus and bacteria that attack the roots of the crops – though the crops are profitable. The little that you can take from here, you can sell.

It is crowded here. The reservation had around 1500 hectares and you had plenty of room, with the advantage that the land was flat. It's very expensive here to build a house and to plant crops because there are lots of stones. You can't have animals here, because the houses are too close together and there are crops. So nobody has any animals because they don't want problems. Because we don't want to have tensions amongst ourselves.

There is an eternal tranquillity here: we haven't been mistreated by the neighbours and the armed groups haven't arrived. It's a very decent region, though everyone sees it they want to.

To be able to support ourselves, we sell what we grow, the *bastimento*<sup>14</sup> and we get meat and vegetables from others. Yuca and plantains are what the land most produces; we take some of the corn and sell it and with that we buy the other things we need, but it's not enough. Yuca can be harvested every eight months and the *guineo*<sup>15</sup> once a year from one cutting: By the second cutting, the harvest is of no use. So you don't have enough money to buy the *orgánico*<sup>16</sup>, nor any of the *biológico*<sup>17</sup> to treat the plants and keep them in good shape. Whatever results...that's what you have to use! Corn can be harvested every three months, but you can't grow more than a hectare because sometimes there's no rain; so you can only grow it on the small piece of land where there is irrigation. And to earn a living, you have to hire yourself out on a daily basis when you can, sometimes clearing the land on other farms, and right now, with an international foundation around, with some construction work.

Lots of times, you say to yourself, that as long as there's life, you have everything else. But when you don't have anything, you'd rather

die than suffer, because suffering is worse. When you're dead you don't suffer. Here we've suffered a lot since the displacement; we don't want to remember those moments: hunger, and, above all, a situation where there was no place to go and no one to turn to for help. Here there has always been need! When we arrived, we didn't have anything and we were new and nobody had anything. That changed when we started to grow subsistence crops. When we sold the farm, we had some money. We spent it. We began to plant and with the little bit left that we had in savings, we bought the food we needed to survive. When we had our own subsistence crops that changed, but the other people still suffered from shortages.

From the government, through the *Red*<sup>18</sup> – which is now *Acción Social* (Social Action) – the program of communal pots has helped us a lot. Each person is given a bit of food so he can distribute it according to his conscience, because when one gets some work it lasts longer. So this has been a great help; but it's the only help we've gotten from the state.

We've gotten help for productive projects from *Fundebán*<sup>19</sup>. They've supported us with individual productive projects, in agricultural production, sowing, and the raising of chickens or hens. I got involved in that project. They gave us a hose, some seeds, and a crop-spraying implement. We can look at that implement, and nothing more, because we don't have anything with which to fumigate. We have it as a luxury!

#### *It's still dangerous to go back*

No one has yet returned to the reservation, because if you left from there, they say that you go back to spy, to see where and how the armed groups are. So they target you again.

There are people who come from there and say that those who remain are doing fine. It's the people who return that have a problem, because there has been a total change in the population. Those that you knew from before have left or were made to leave. And there are other

people, who don't know you and whom you don't know...so it's dangerous because they are strangers, and you are a stranger to the rest of the community. It's said that the situation has improved now that apparently (the paramilitaries) have handed themselves in<sup>20</sup>, but it's also said that the paramilitaries are still around. My brothers live near here: one near the road to Pivijay where he is working. The other is studying in the SENA<sup>21</sup>. A sister is married here; the other got married and went to live in Pivijay. Her husband has a farm and his life has changed: he's doing well.

I'm afraid to go there because I don't know the place and the paramilitaries are everywhere: they are like bacteria. They didn't do anything to me because I was just a child when it all happened, but now that I'm a grown man, I'm afraid of them.

#### *We are around 2000 chimilas*

As far as I know we are 2000 Indians and, of those, 230 were displaced to here, by the road to Santa Marta. At the beginning, when we were displaced by the Spaniards, some Indians, some families were left here in the valley. And they are still here; they have land. But the majority of them are there in Sabanas de San Ángel.

I speak some of the language; I have a girl and yes, we are going to teach it to her. My partner (an Indian) also understands and speaks the language. She came with me from the reservation; her family didn't leave; they're still there on the reservation. She gets along well with my mom. We've almost been together for six years; we have a very pretty girl, who just about to turn one.

We didn't do anything to prevent the pregnancy, it's the will of God, and in our culture you don't use contraceptives. Of course, if the woman doesn't want to end up pregnant, there are plants for that. There are men who know the plants and can prepare them. And there are also plants that help women get pregnant: if the couple wants a girl, they take a plant that gives them a girl; if they want a boy, there are plants for that too.

18 Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network). 19 Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Zona Bananera (Foundation for the Development of the Banana Zone), with funds from the multinational company Dole and its independent growers. 20 Refers to the negotiation process with the government. 21 Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Training Service).

Everyone almost always wants a boy; but after the first boy, they want a girl. I wanted my first child to be a boy, though a girl will get married and have kids before a boy does and thus turn you into a grandfather very quickly. Now it seems we'll have to stop, until there is a change in our lives. She's still breast feeding the girl, and as long as she's breast feeding, she won't get pregnant. But as soon as she stops breast feeding, we'll have to adopt precautions.

I don't know what (traditional) clothes are like; I wasn't able to learn; if I did know, I would be using them now. Everything about the clothes has been forgotten because 40 years ago, people on the coast told the Indians not to dress in their traditional clothes and instead gave them their clothes. So that part of the culture was lost. There are some elderly people who saw their father's clothes, but those elders don't remember how to make the clothes or how to make the designs on the clothes. They say that they saw their father's clothes, but they don't know how to make them. The clothes were white but the Indian extracted paint from the wood of trees and used the paint to make designs on the clothes.

There are things that one can't control anymore, like war. The wise ones controlled such things; they say that an Indian doesn't scare another Indian. They always tell you how you should behave, what you should do. But often they don't tell you why, or when, or how; they just tell you. And you already know what is bad, because God himself says that it's not worth explaining something to someone who isn't prepared to understand it.

We aren't hungry for money; we don't love money, but instead get just what we need to eat and dress ourselves. But we don't try to possess money, because that's where war comes from. God said don't take money because it's bad, it's bad to be ambitious for money. So act decently and God will protect you.

Whenever you get up you say to the Sun: "okay, you've risen, lets work again today; I want you to accompany me, let's accompany each

other; let's take care of each other." And when it gets dark: "okay, its going to get dark, let's retire, let's rest, we have to rest so we can return to work tomorrow with strength and will..."

When it hasn't rained, we do rituals. God tells us how to do them. Then we get together and go ahead and do them. Various people conduct the ceremonies because one person gets tired speaking by himself the whole night. The people rotate; first the elders speak. Each ceremony is carried out because of someone's dream. If anyone has a dream in which God tells him what to do he tells the others and the ceremony takes place.

In the ceremony, you consume coffee and tobacco, smoked and chewed, both men and women. It's the way to heal oneself: you chew the tobacco and apply it to your entire body. The tobacco protects you from everything: from the wild animals, from everything... If you could, you would do the ceremonies every week, one ceremony per week. But that depends on being able to get the coffee and the tobacco, principally the tobacco, which is the force that allows you to communicate with Yao<sup>22</sup>. It's normal tobacco. And everyone must have some. When the institutions collaborate, they provide eight packages and that lasts the whole night. We, the new ones, hardly smoke; the elders smoke the most. They give you two cigars at night and with that you're fine. But since the elders chew in addition to smoking they use up more. I also chew.

An Indian should chew tobacco every day and every night before going to bed for protection. You communicate with God through the tobacco, but sometimes you don't have tobacco. Before in La Pola, we had tobacco, because we grew and produced it.

There aren't any materials for making arrows, bows and those typical things, like the flute for playing music. That material is taken from the tree that we call *bonga*<sup>23</sup> and the *majagua* which exist here, but which don't give fruit. I don't know what's wrong, but they don't produce; they don't give fruit...! It's with the fruits



that they make the instruments for playing music. There may be artificial instruments made by people from the outside, but they're not the typical ones. It's possible that they even sound better, but they're not '*culturales*.'<sup>24</sup> The arrow is made from cañamazo, a plant with thin spikes, and the bow, from "lumbre" or "cabreto", but there's none of that wood around here.

#### *Hoping to return*

The bows and arrows were left behind on the reservation. We couldn't take them with us because with what we had, we already had too much. It's that when you travel you never know where you'll end up. Yea, we knew that we would end up in this area, but we didn't know exactly

where. We knew that there was land available for people like us who were afraid of the war. So we came here with the hope of returning. That's what I would like to do: return to La Pola if God allows it. They say that they are going to give the land there to the demobilized; I don't know if they've already given it to them. And we don't know if there's a program for returning; we don't know if there are peasant farmers there again.

Right now, there's a project involving petitioning for land, which we are doing as a community. We'll see if the government agrees to give us some land, not the same that we had there, but at least some land where we can spread out more, have animals and a source of income that is more in keeping...





# Hernando\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
51 years old.	Farmer.	Forcibly displaced from Ciénaga (Magdalena).

## *I've known those lands since I was five*

I come from the hamlet of Kennedy in the parish of San Pedro de la Sierra in Ciénaga (Magdalena). I've lived there since July 16, 1991. The lands aren't mine: they are an inheritance of my wife's. According to the land deeds, my father- and mother-in-law have been the owners since 1962.

I've known those lands since I was five. My mother-in-law was a school teacher who taught the majority of people in the hamlet. Her work made her well-known and respected. Back then, a settler's life was peaceful: there were no public order problems; no illegal armed groups, and there was nothing to fear from daily life. Families arrived from different parts of the country, but there was always camaraderie and respect.

My great-grandfather settled these lands in 1938. He founded the *La Florida* farm, which now belongs to the Balaguera family. He was originally from the municipality of Líbano (Tolima).

The people who came to colonize these lands traditionally were coffee growers. The lands of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, like the departments of Tolima, Quindío and Caldas are mountainous, with a coffee growing tradition, and the people who arrived from those parts wanted to keep up the custom. It's still the way.

## *The guerrillas were respectful*

The arrival of illegal armed groups – the guerrillas – began to occur between 1975 and 1980, though at that time they didn't have a massive presence. I think they were just beginning to penetrate the area. The behaviour of the groups varied according to their interests, and, it's possible that some people suffered the rigour of their way of thinking, their revolutionary ideology.

They were communists, and perhaps some people had ideological conflicts with them, but they were very respectful as far as people's daily lives. The reality is that people around here didn't have any political orientation: they worked in agriculture and had a simple way of thinking.

At that time, there was no talk of peasant farmers fleeing from illegal armed groups. Around 1985, when large farms emerged, those groups might have begun to make demands on the owners of those farms. But I don't remember any displacements. The simple, ordinary peasant farmer – the small landowner that we know in Colombia – had no problem with people seizing his land.

The thought awakens a nostalgia in me. Though I'm not a landowner directly, I feel that the land belongs to me because of our traditional family presence in the region.

*I wanted to contribute something to our development*

When the violent death of my father-in-law induced me to return to the land, I supported my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law and my wife, so that they wouldn't lose it. It was a patrimony, and my parents-in-law had laboured hard on it to advance the fortunes of the family. I wanted to help make it more productive. That was my ideal and it makes me truly sad that we couldn't continue along that path.

The farm is relatively small, having no more than around 20 hectares. It's divided into three different lots, but is run from just one part where we have our house and which is known as

*La Linda*. It was the first property acquired by my father-in-law. Then he got the lot called *Bello Paris*, and, finally, a third one from the grandson of the former owners of the previous two. Together, those three plots made up the farm.

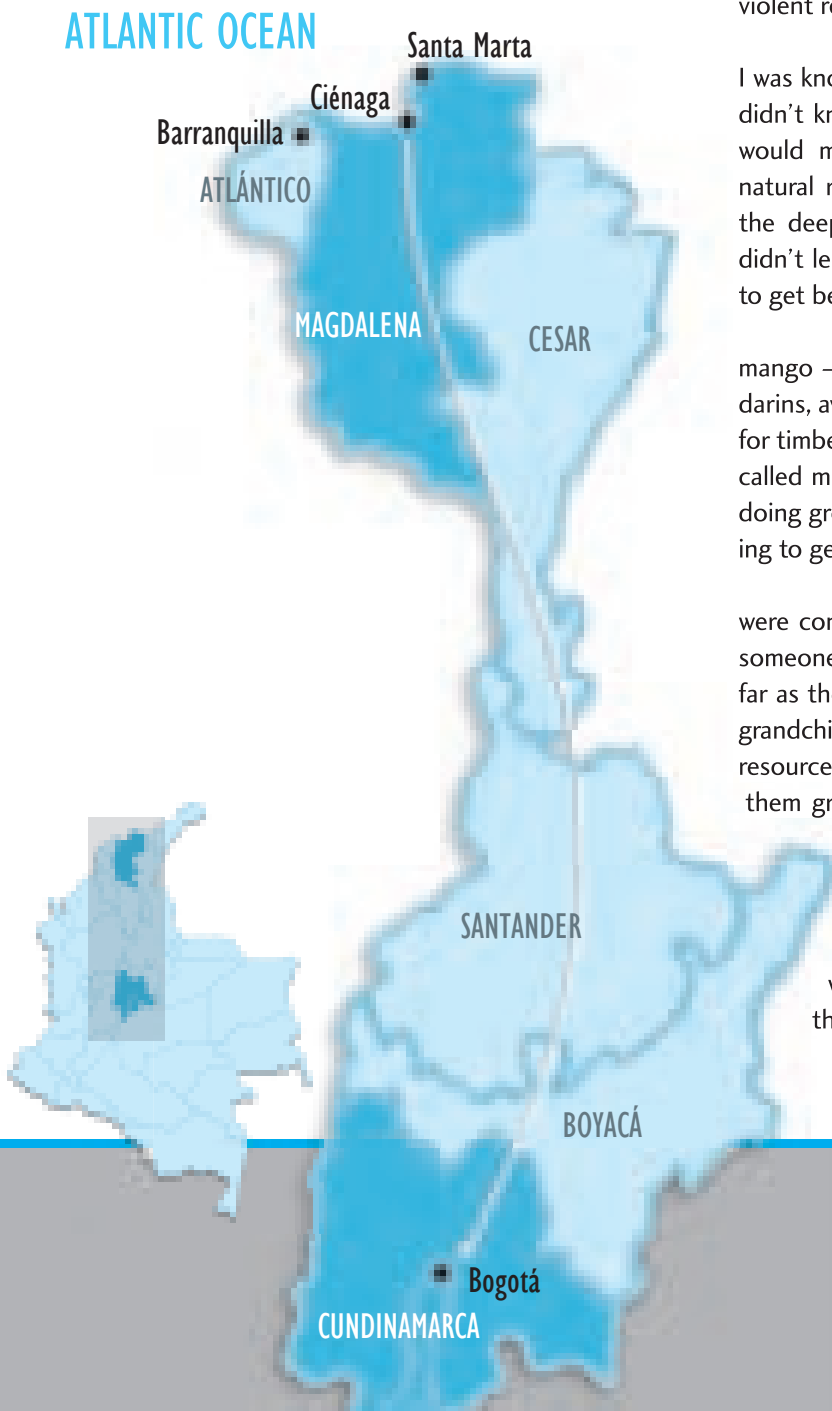
Upon my arrival in the municipality of Ciénaga, there were two lots that my mother-in-law decided not to claim. One was a farm in the hamlet of Guaymaro, next to the hamlet of Kennedy, which was in the hands of people I never knew. And another far above the hamlet which was in the hands of a fruit grower and we didn't claim either, though we knew it had belonged to my father-in-law. After his violent death, my mother-in-law didn't want to take any step in that direction as she didn't want to be exposed to a possibly violent response by the people who lived there.

Upon arriving, I realized that, though I was known by members of the community, they didn't know how to work the land in a way that would maximize production. Having trained in natural resources, I could contribute ideas. But the deep-rooted tradition of coffee cultivation didn't lend itself to them taking on new projects to get better use out of the land.

So I began to grow fruit trees. I planted mango – the emblem of the municipality – mandarins, avocados, níspero (loquat) and even trees for timber. Some people thought it was funny and called me crazy. "What did I possibly think I was doing growing timber? What did I think I was going to get out of it?," they asked.

I told them that as far as the fruit trees were concerned that: "If I didn't eat them, then someone from my family would eat them." And as far as the timber that "I'm planting it so that my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren have a resource to harvest. If they want to grow food, let them grow food. I'm going to grow timber and one day, someone will benefit from it."

Fruit trees take four to six years to produce, but when they began to produce, people understood that I was getting more benefit from working the land than they had in 30 or 40 years



of being in the region. I had known those lands since 1962 and they were inherited from my wife's parents. But people began to race to imitate me. I considered the people of the hamlet part of my family because they were my neighbours, and I began to train and help them: "look, if you're going to plant mango, don't plant mango next to it, but always another species, plant zapote [costeño] (marmalade tree)<sup>1</sup>, plant níspero (sapodilla)<sup>2</sup> or plant avocados, so that when it comes time to harvest you don't have to compete with your neighbour with the same product, but can harvest at different times and earn more." And people began to listen to my advice and plant different things.

I had 20 neighbours there – around 20 – living in the hamlet. And almost all of them now have mango, though some have planted zapote, níspero and avocados. The production is now constant and divided by seasons and there isn't that excess of one product anymore. That helps a lot in terms of prices.

Afterwards, I was able to transmit my knowledge of natural resources to students in the SENA<sup>3</sup> and that gave added value to my opinions. People would ask me for instructions as to how to set up their crops and what crops they should plant to get the most benefit from the land. That gave me even greater satisfaction, because they would seek me out at my house for help. I would mark out their lands and help them with the seedbeds, and it was really satisfying, because apart from having friends from the region, I was getting recognition for my knowledge. That was one of the most rewarding things for me. It is one of the things that I'm most sad to have lost: to have lost the recognition of those who were my family from the hamlet – not my nuclear family, but my family of neighbours, the family of those working there.

#### *An unacceptable situation*

The loss of that 'family' began on December 20, 2004 when the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (Peasant Self-

Defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá) and the Autodefensas Campesinas (Peasant Self-Defence Forces) began to settle in the area. They had already been present in the region for around for two or three years and had carried out operations from Siberia. But that was separated from San Pedro by the Frío River which empties into the Ciénaga Grande del Magdalena and bathes the lands of the Banana Zone. The River Frío has its source in the mountainous area of the municipality of Ciénaga in the parish of San Pedro and divides Siberia from San Pedro de la Sierra.

People in Siberia were aware that the self-defence forces had encampments and buildings there and were carrying out operations. But then the self-defence forces entered the parish of San Pedro – principally the hamlet of Kennedy where I live – by the roads that traditionally unite the parishes of San Pedro and Siberia and are used to transport goods.

From that moment on, things began to occur that people had never seen before. It was totally unacceptable that they (the paramilitaries) demanded cash from us for their financing. The coffee culture didn't allow people to have sufficient cash on hand to pay them: people had to wait until the fruit trees began to produce. So (the paramilitaries) began to demand contributions in exchange for permission to plant other crops apart from coffee.

Members of the community began to comment discretely among themselves that it wasn't fair that they planted a tree, waited four, five, six years for it to produce and then had to pay for permission to be able to sell the fruit. They were upset and couldn't get used to it.

Another difficult thing for them were the demands of the armed self-defence groups that they dedicate one day a week to building roads that would connect the parishes of Siberia and San Pedro de la Sierra. The roads were intended to serve as routes for transporting the coca planted by the groups in the River Frío Canyon, and people were forced from their house under the threat of death to begin working at four

1 Fruit, *Calocarpum mammosum*. 2 Fruit, *Achras sapota*. 3 Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Training Service).

in the morning. The days ended at 3 or four in the afternoon, but the workers didn't get back to their houses until night and didn't receive any food during the day: they had to take their own food or go hungry.

The land used to grow those illegal crops was mountainous and the armed groups exploited the timber that they found. So people also had to go and transport the wood from where it had been cut to where the mule herds could collect it and take it to the highway. From there it would be moved by boat to Santa Marta for sale. Members of the community were taken from their houses to haul the wood on trails – because there were no roads. It was hard work, and they were exposed to all kinds of accidents.

Then every owner of a farm, or small plot, was made to plant a hectare of subsistence crops as food for the groups. They were made to plant a hectare of yuca, plantains, ñame (water yam)<sup>4</sup>, malanga (arrowleaf)<sup>5</sup> as well as other species. When the farmers had planted their hectare, they had to raise pigs and chickens. According to the words of señor alias *Alejandro* or alias *el Centauro* (the Centaur) or alias *el Político* (the Politician) – they were known by those three nicknames – the groups also ate meat. So of the animals we raised, 70% would be for them and 30% for us.

It was an unacceptable situation, people said, and totally unjustifiable that they, as small-scale farmers, had to grow one or two hectares of corn and raise chickens so that the groups could carry off the corn that the animals ate and then the animals themselves. It was not a friendly atmosphere.

It began to undermine people's spirit for work, and it's possible that some of them protested. As for me, I went to speak to *el Político* and told him that making us pay to sell crops, that we had worked so long to get, amounted to taking money from our pockets: if they wanted money, they should work for it just like we did.

### *They put a gun to my head*

It's possible that the comment didn't please the ears of the members of the armed group. On Jan. 4, 2005, the group installed, with death threats, another family in the house of the *Bello Paris* farm. Since that day, a man known by the alias *Óscar* has lived there; alias *El Político* also lived there for a while.

When I first met alias *Óscar*, he was living on small patch of land in the lower part of the hamlet of Kennedy. Then they moved him to the *Bello Paris* house. I was forced to let both *Óscar* and *El Político* live there.

I had to abandon my property on Friday, September 16, 2005. I left my house, the house of the *La Linda* farm, from where I had managed *La Linda*, *Bello Paris* and the other piece of land alongside.

The conversation with them that day was aggressive. I remember that *104* or alias *Esteban* – who was second in charge of the group – arrived at the house with alias *90* and with alias *el Negro*, and by their appearance and the smell of their breath, I could tell they were drinking. Maybe, it was the effect of alcohol that made them say things they shouldn't. They told me they needed to store 'material.' I told them: "Hombre, (Mr.) if it's war material, I'm very sorry but I can't store it here. The army is in the zone. If they find that in my house, it will be me that suffers the consequences. That's when alias *90* took out his gun and put it to my head and said: "If you don't open the door to the room, I'll kill you right here!"

I had been eating lunch and it was one in the afternoon. The only thing I could think of was to tell Jairo, the administrator, to open up the two unoccupied rooms, one of which served as a warehouse for storing the harvest and the other, as shelter for the workers during the harvest period. But alias *104* kept talking and saying that we in the hamlet and, especially me, thought that they were fools, because under no circumstances were they going to go to the (peace) negotiations in the parish of Guachaca<sup>6</sup>, nor were they going to hand in weapons that were in good condition.

They weren't going to demobilize their best men – those with sophisticated military training – either. They were going to demobilize people with a low-military profile and hand in only those weapons that were already old and obsolete. I knew, that even if the military material they wanted me to store no longer had a use, it might implicate me in the crime of rebellion or terrorism. And I've never had any connection with rebellion, nor have I been a terrorist. My career within the community and my relationship with el Sena proves that I've never had anything to do with those things and that I'm no criminal.

After they had seen the two rooms, they decided on the room where the workers usually stayed, because the warehouse, though larger, held other things, like fertilizer, wood for future construction of the house, food for the animals, tools and other supplies.

I didn't decide right away to abandon the area. It seemed that the situation on September 16 was a passing one. I thought that the threats directed at me and the gun put to my head were just pressure: pressure so that I would give in and let them store the materials there for their presentation on September 20th or 21<sup>st</sup> in the conversations at Guachaca (Magdalena).

#### *A situation of imminent danger*

On Friday September 16 I went to the municipality of Ciénaga as was my custom. Every weekend I would journey to the urban area of the municipality, visit my family, and return to the farm on Sunday to stay on top of my farm work. Nonetheless, on Sunday, two days after leaving the farm, the granary where I made my purchases didn't open, and so, for reasons of fate, I didn't travel back to the farm that day but waited until Monday to be able to make my purchases and travel.

But very early in the morning on Monday – I think it was still a few minutes before six in the morning – a neighbour who had worked with me on the farm came to warn me not to return because they were waiting to kill me.

Some people had already perceived that my situation was of imminent danger. My neighbour warned me that on Friday the men who had threatened me had returned 20 minutes later in search of me, but that I had already left for Ciénaga. As I was returning on foot on Monday another man picked me up on the highway. I had been walking from time to time among the coffee bushes so I wouldn't be seen, and I had a premonition that something might happen to me on the highway, though, while in Ciénaga, I thought that they were just pressuring me. But as they had put a gun to my head, I was afraid, worried about how things might turn out.

This man told me that I shouldn't return because they were waiting to kill me, that on Saturday and then on Sunday at 8 at night, the (paramilitaries) had gone back to the farm to look for me. He told me that on Sunday, Jairo, my full-time time worker who lived with me, had already shut the doors of the house when they arrived at 8 to ask for me. My stereo and the light inside were still on. So they decided to open fire into my room. According to what he told me, the room was shot up from three sides.

After I heard that, I decided not to return until I could confirm whether in fact it had all really happened. I tried to contact some other neighbours from the hamlet who also lived in the urban part of Ciénaga. But I couldn't clarify the situation. I didn't go near the commercial area of Ciénaga where the cooperative of drivers from San Pedro La Sierra is, where the drivers take you in their jeeps to the rural area of Ciénaga – Siberia, San Pedro and Palmar. Because I knew – and had seen in recent days and during the occupation of the hamlet – that members of the self-defence forces spent time around the commercial and transport area. It's public knowledge that they illegally charge 'vacuna,'<sup>7</sup> – extort – the small businessmen of Ciénaga. It's probably no exaggeration to say that even the coffee salesmen pay a daily quota – 1,000 or 1,200 pesos – to be able to sell their coffee.

### *The order was to kill me*

I wasn't able to find anything out on Monday about what was happening on the farm. On Tuesday, another person I knew from the hamlet showed up at my house in Ciénaga, met my wife there, and began to give her the news: as of Monday afternoon – when he left the hamlet – there had been no word of Jairo. On Sunday night, when the shooting began, Jairo took his wife and went running with her through the coffee plantations. According to the neighbour, they (the paramilitaries) had in fact been looking for me and tried to kill me on Sunday thinking I was in my room sleeping. But on Monday, when they realized that the attack had failed, and that there had been no word of a dead person, they proceeded to gather the community together again and warned all my neighbours that they shouldn't tell me what was happening. Anyone who got involved, they said, risked the same fate: in other words, they might kill him.

They talked specifically of me to all the neighbours. Alias, *César* or *101*, who was the commander of the entire group, gave an order to all his subordinates in the hamlet, and even in San Pablo – where the highway begins – that whoever caught sight of me was required to liquid me. Even if I was passing by on the road in a car, they had to stop the car, get me out and, in front of whoever was present, kill me. It was an order, made publicly, in front of everyone at the meeting.

My neighbour warned me that the order had been transmitted to the self-defence forces in the urban area and that whoever saw me, wherever they saw me, was under orders to kill me.

So with the confirmation that I faced an imminent danger there, that I couldn't go to the farm or stay in the town, I decided to abandon the municipality of Ciénaga. The first thing I thought of was my son: the boy was 23 and had returned from where he was doing his rural work as a veterinarian. My thoughts were of him. As I had some friends I get could money from, I explained them my situation and began to take steps to find a place for him. I travelled to Bogotá,

after denouncing to the Fiscalía what had happened to me, and my wife went to Santa Marta. We abandoned our house in Ciénaga and haven't gone back since.

### *All my rights were violated*

I feel and I see that all my rights were violated, that it was violated by criminals. They violated my right to private property, and they violated my right to grow as a person as I saw fit. The sanctity of my house wasn't respected. They violated my right to elect and be elected. In August 2005, there was going to be an election for justice of the peace of the parish of San Pedro de la Sierra, and they told everyone from the hamlets that whoever felt capable of doing the job should present his résumé. But this señor *101*, this alias *César*, went to my house and told me: "You can't run in this election." I saw that they had me in their sights 'yes, I was capable of doing this!': I had my technical degree, I was a teacher at el Sena, and I had done a course as a "conciliador en equidad (conciliator through fairness) with the Ministerio de Justicia (Ministry of Justice). So "What rights as a human being were left me after those men appeared there? I was stripped of all my rights, all my rights were usurped. I lost my right to participate in elections and my right to work. I lost my right to an education because right now I don't have any money and I'm economically helpless.

I have had to go and plead with Acción Social (Presidential Agency for Social Action and International Cooperation) for them to somehow protect the right to education of my daughter who is still studying. As for me, I really don't have any protection from anything.

I feel that here in Colombia I'm not worth anything. I don't have the right to work because I'm about to turn 51 and they discriminate against me for my age. Simply because I'm older than 50, I don't have that right, though I nearly have all my working capacity intact, I don't have any physical impediments, I have some training and my mind is lucid. So I don't understand,



I don't understand. Despite the adversity that displacement has caused me, I am still optimistic about life, about my ability to perform. I know that here in Colombia they close the doors on people because of their age and even for having suffered a forced displacement. Because if you've been displaced, they look at you as a disposable person. I am a displaced person, but I'm not a

criminal. It was the criminals who displaced me and who made me lose all those rights that I have mentioned.

So I hope to be able to go to some country where there is a humanitarian program, where I can work, produce. Unfortunately, it will be some other country and not my own.



*But as they had put a gun to my head to my head, I was afraid, worried about how things might turn out.*





## Simón\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
16 years old.	Student.	He has been forcibly displaced three times with his family.

### *Those people turned up and forced us to leave*

I was born in Ciénaga (Magdalena), but my parents decided to take me to Palenque, where my mother was born. We lived well there. My Dad worked every day, he brought us sugar cane and we ate it. It was really great. My older brother looked after us younger ones, we looked after each other. When we were displaced, it affected all of us.

We weren't short of anything. We went to school, my dad worked hard, we were OK. We lived pretty much comfortably, but not in the city – in a village. My dad went there to work, he brought us up. Until those people came and forced us to leave. We went to Cartagena and lived well there for a while too. And then they turned up again and forced us out and we went to Barranquilla – we were there for eight or nine years. Our life was almost the same as in Palenque. I say almost the same because when we arrived sometimes we didn't eat before we went to bed. We lived in one room, but it didn't have a roof. The wind battered us around. It's pretty windy there, and that affected us.

My mum started to make 'envueltos'<sup>1</sup> and we went out and sold them. We got enough money together to finish the whole house – we put a roof on that first room that my dad built. Af-

terwards, dad and I got a rug, a really good one. We put it on the floor and that's where we slept. Seeing our situation, my aunt lent us a bed and so then some of us slept in the bed, the others on the rug. After that, my mum never wanted to get rid of the rug, because it had been of great use to us. So she put it in one of the beds, and that's where we keep it.

Then my dad was displaced and my mum decided to come here, to Bogotá. Things have gone well for us here, because we've been studying. My dad continues doing what he likes, and my mum supports him as always.

The first time we left Palenque, I was about five years old. My mum says they rounded us up in the beds and then they grabbed my older brother and beat him up. They split his lip and they nearly dislocated his arm. They treated my mum badly too, they hit her. They hit all of us, but most of all my brother.

As our yard was big, my dad had to run to a neighbour's and hide amongst the bushes. I don't know if he could hear, but they had us trapped there. I don't really remember those people, but my mum said that if they weren't guerrillas, they were paramilitaries. I don't really remember, my parents kept me on the sidelines of it all. They don't want me to keep going over what happened to me.

\* Name changed at the request of the interviewee. 1 A snack made of corn, vegetables meat wrapped in plantain leaves.

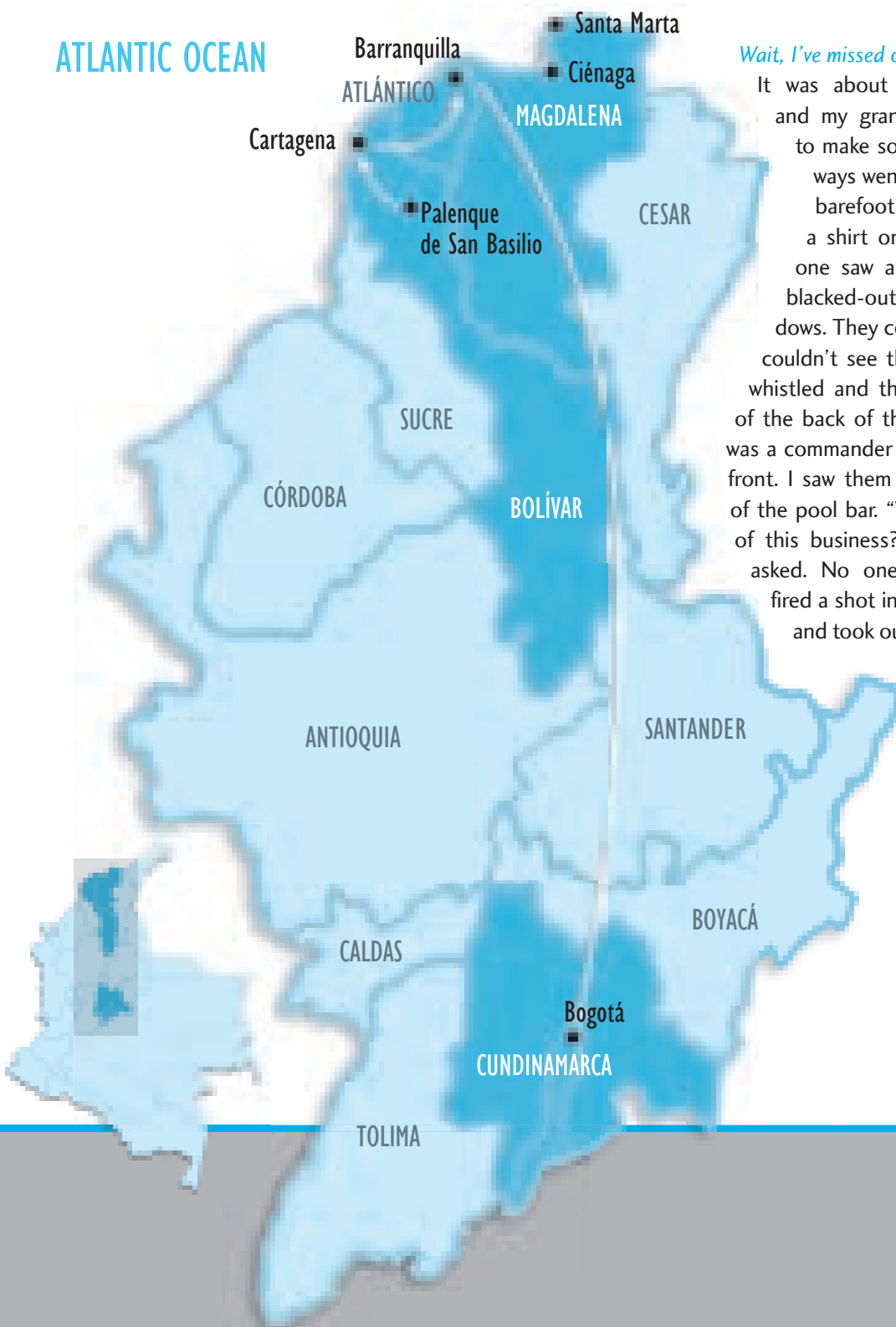
*The farm we left behind*

All that had happened to me, and I was only 13. They sent me to my grandmother's to have a holiday there, they sent me to check on the farm we'd left behind. We were in Barranquilla when they sent me back [to Palenque]. No one wanted to go except me, so they sent me.

I found the farm. It was completely overgrown - you had to put your arms in the air

for people to see you. When we were displaced, my dad left the farm with a friend of his so he would look after it in return for half the animals. His friend agreed to take care of the farm, in exchange for half the animals, offered to look after it when he could, tidy it up. But it looked as if he'd never tidied it up, because when I got there it was a mess. The banana plants had all fallen over, ruined. It really hurt that they displaced my dad, displaced us like that!

ATLANTIC OCEAN



*Wait, I've missed one!*

It was about midday that day and my grandmother sent me to make some coffee - we always went barefoot so I was barefoot and I didn't have a shirt on. Suddenly everyone saw a truck arrive, with blacked-out, bullet-proof windows. They could see us, but we couldn't see them. One of them whistled and they all jumped out of the back of the truck and there was a commander who was riding up front. I saw them ask for the owner of the pool bar. "Where's the owner of this business?" the commander asked. No one answered so he fired a shot into the air - bang! - and took out one of the street lights. When ev-

everyone saw him fire the shot, they started to pay attention to him. They all lined up, and when the commander asked for the owner of the pool bar again, one of them said: "He's gone out, but he won't be long." After 15 minutes had passed, the commander fired off another shot and the same chap said that the pool bar owner would be long, that he didn't know why he was taking so long... the commander went wild, he flew into a rage and he started killing people. When those at the back saw that he was killing those at the front, they fled over the walls and because the tops of walls were lined with broken glass, they cut themselves to the bone. Other injured their thighs.

There was one person sitting at the entrance of the pool hall on a stool and he was shaking all over. I was near by, and I heard everything. They started to fire. I was partially hidden. But my body was exposed from the neck down. One [of the gunmen] saw me and fired a shot in my direction. It hit the bars and ricocheted - bang! - into the fridge. It sounded like an explosion and burned the refrigerator.

Afterwards they said that we shouldn't say a word about what had happened, and that if they got to hear that we'd said anything, then they would kill us! When they were going to leave, they'd already killed seven people when the man said: "Wait, I've missed one!" He got out a sub-machine gun and - bang! - he fired off about four shots. He hit someone in the head, he blew their brains out, and the chap was writhing in agony. And me there, watching...

Before all that happened, he'd accompanied me down to the river so I could wash myself. We began to play. When I said that I had to go because I had an errand to run for my grandmother, he said: "I'm going to go to the pool hall and have a "chicha"<sup>2</sup>. And then those people turned up, and they killed him!

The lad was 18 years old...and the other seven they killed would have finished school now if they were still alive.

The paramilitaries had shut down the pool bar the year before. They'd already been

threatening the owner before they came to kill him - if they came by and found the bar open, they'd kill him and everyone inside. When they came to ask for the pool bar owner, he knew they were coming and so he left and the people stayed there in the bar. The owner put this lad I've been telling you about in charge of the bar, but the lad was one of the most responsible people in Palenque. People asked him to look after all sorts of things and he always came through for them. He was never in trouble with anyone, he had no vices. Well, the only vice he had was coffee, but no cigarettes, nothing like that.

After the paramilitaries left, I stayed there. I couldn't move at all. Someone who knew my grandmother carried me running to her house, and then I began to shake. I changed colour. My grandmother rang home to Barranquilla to see if they could send some money so I could pay my way home, because it worried her to see me in such a state. At night I had nightmares about it all, I talked in my sleep. I even shouted! No one in the house could sleep.

They didn't send me home the usual way, the way I'd come. They sent me on a rural route with a friend of my mum and dad's called Segundito. From there we travelled with one of those vehicles that come to collect the yuca (cassava). We had to pay 20,000 pesos for a lift to Barranquilla.

### *I've not been able to overcome it!*

In Barranquilla the same thing happened. Everything I saw made me think of those people. Just the sight of a soldier had me running from the house. I've not been able to overcome it. They put me through some interviews, gave me psychologists, and I feel that I've changed a bit.

At school, I couldn't do it anymore. Whenever I spoke, it was about what happened to me. Before I'd been an excellent student and I stood out socially and in all the subjects, but after all that I changed a bit. Life wasn't the same for me anymore, I didn't enjoy running around,

playing hide and seek like before. None of it – I just stayed at home. Before it all happened I never fought, but afterwards I fought with my sister, with everyone, I was rude to them. I was a responsible boy, I really enjoyed helping people – I still do – but my mum says I've changed a bit.

I still have nightmares about what happened. Sometimes the dreams come and suddenly I can't sleep anymore. I see those men talking, I see the shots being fired, I see the injured people. In my dreams I still see that man suffering, I still see him writhing on the ground and all that.

The father of the lad who had his brain blown out came to Bogotá to protest with the people from Palenque. He told me that after I'd left, a couple of years later, they were paying compensation to the families of those that were killed<sup>3</sup> – I think it was the government paying, because they were students and the youngest one was 16. But they didn't pay for his son. The father of the boy doesn't want payment, because they can't compensate for his son with money. Money doesn't compensate for the loss of someone. He says they should help to get a psychologist for the lad's mum and for himself, because neither of them has been able to overcome it. Those memories have come flooding back to me too. I felt terrible. He wanted us to help him with that.

I'd really like to help him, because his son was a good friend of mine. Alright then, he was more my brother's friend, but his father was a friend of mine. The whole family were friends of ours.

#### *Why would God do this?*

We built the house in Barranquilla and in front of it we planted things, medicinal plants, fruit trees, everything. My brother-in-law, the one from Barranquilla, takes care of it all. He works with a horse and cart – what they call a “carremula” round here – and he can't earn much more than 30,000 pesos. My sister says that he doesn't earn enough to sustain his children and that sometimes they go to bed without...

I get the feeling sometimes that they're going through the same thing as we did, but at the same time I think it's different. When we arrived in Barranquilla, sometimes we didn't eat before we went to bed. One time we went for four days – no, a week – not eating before we went to bed, and my dad kept looking to see what he could get his hands on. At night, we heard them talking, and my mum asking what was happening, why would God do that? And that if it was a test, then they would get through it and keep going, come what may.

What I liked most about Barranquilla was the breeze... and that it felt the same as in Palenque, because they didn't say anything to you. But what I liked least was that people stole from you. That's to say, in Palenque if you left a bicycle in the street it would still be there in the morning. No one would take it, wherever you left it. But in Barranquilla, leave a shirt out and someone will take it.

My brother left school to help us, so we could continue studying. One New Year's Eve, he bought two pairs of trousers, a shirt and some shoes, and by January 1 they'd stolen them all. They left him without any clothes. That side of Barranquilla I don't like, but the rest of it I do.

I played football on my own, because the others played hide and seek and I didn't like it, I was scared of being taken away. I was afraid to go out, go out and bump into those people, the paramilitaries again. I was afraid that I'd see them killing someone, stabbing them or robbing them. I always remember them, I always remember those people!

#### *And with this one, three displacements*

When we came here, we'd been displaced twice, and now three times. That's tough! Various people have suggested to my dad that they'd help us leave the country so that we wouldn't have to suffer anymore. But he doesn't want to leave. He says if he leaves Bogotá he might go to Venezuela or back to Barranquilla, but that wherever we are, we'll be OK.

My brother Wilmer, the oldest one, the one they beat up, he's in La Guajira, working with an aunt. My sister Ermelina is in Cúcuta with her husband and one child, and my sister Meyby is still in Barranquilla with her husband and two children. The three youngest are all here: my older sister Raquel is in 9th grade, Maryluz is in 6th grade and I'm in 7th grade at the Cervantino secondary school in Ciudad Bolívar<sup>4</sup>.

I brought one of my nieces with me, because from the moment she could walk, she's followed me around. The first name she ever said was mine. She called me "Peyo... Eyo" all the time, whatever she needed. When I was leaving to come here, she started crying and it distressed me to leave her, so I brought her with me. As they didn't charge for her ticket, we brought her with us and she had her second birthday in Bogotá. It was hard to persuade her mum. I spent two days begging her to let me bring her with me. Eventually I persuaded her and I polished my niece's shoes and packed her clothes. She didn't want to go with her mum in the bus, but with me. My mum took her back not so long ago, when my nephew, the other one who I haven't met yet, was born. Recently I met my nephew from Cúcuta. He's two or three, but I hadn't met him before. He looks like my grandfather, like my dad, although my nephew is blond and my dad's got black hair. But he looks just the same. I look like my mum, people tell me I look like her.

Sometimes I fight with my sisters because they argue with my mum and I don't like it when they shout at her. It's mainly my older sister who likes to answer her back. I tell her that I'll hit her if she carries on provoking my mum. And out of spite, she carries on answering back and sometimes I have to hit her... I don't hit her that hard though. She picks fights with me too, and sometimes she scratches me. My mum doesn't notice, although she likes us to talk to her and I tell her my problems. I don't like it when someone provokes her, or when they call me a son of a bitch. It feels like a slap in the face. It has gotten me into lots of trouble at school.

I feel a bit less scared these days, I can go out on my own, but there's still always this fear! I've got this fear, but sometimes I think that – God forbid! – if they kill me, I'll die happy because I've done the things I dreamed about – getting to know Bogotá, getting to know Colombia well, being with my family and not being apart from them for a moment. And that I've done what I most enjoy – playing football. I always dreamed I would do that.

These days it's harder to put food on our plates, because sometimes we run out of money. I've never liked to get anything on credit, but sometimes we have to. It's quite tough with our studies as well.

Some of our neighbours are bad-tempered, and others not. The other day my sister lost 17,000 pesos, which for us is a lot of money. And that night, a neighbour found it and gave it back to us. So that's good, and you know what? That man is really cool with me. Sometimes he asks me to look after his moped, and sometimes he asks my brother too. From that point of view, we've always had good people around us because we're good people and we wouldn't think of harming anyone. I think that's why he gave the money back to us.

But on the other hand, some people in this neighbourhood have done bad things to us, lots of things. Last year, one of the neighbours was casting spells on my mum – black magic, they usually call it. It affected me too – I couldn't move my arm, and it was the one that I write with. In school, I couldn't move it, and I had pains in my heart – something that I've never, ever had before. What happened was that the neighbour offered my mum a box of food, and that's when it started! I ate some of it too, and then we began to feel ill. I don't know if that kind of thing is very common round here, but we started to feel ill.

#### *It's as if you carry a mark*

I've never felt discriminated against because I've never told anyone at the schools

I've been to that I was displaced. Because when I started school, they started talking about displacement and they said that displaced people were thieves. Because we'd been in the news, that's the kind of thing they said about us. From that day I told myself that I'd never say that I'd been displaced.

If they start talking about their homes, I say I've got a house in Barranquilla, that I live in a rented place but I don't live badly. That's what I tell them. But they say: "Simón, you're a displaced person," and I say "no" and I go out and play. If the subject comes up, I always go out and play and avoid the conversation. Otherwise, they wouldn't show me the same trust as they do. It's as if you carry a mark...

Wherever you go, if they find out that you're a displaced person, they don't treat you as kindly as they do others. Of course it shouldn't matter if you are a displaced person, black or white. They should still treat you as an equal. But there are always some who treat others better than they treat you. I've not felt discriminated against because of the colour of my skin here in Bogotá though. No, not that.

I feel bad having to change schools. The year before last, I had to leave with four months still left to complete the year, and then when we got here it took another four months looking for somewhere to study. So that's eight months lost.

I don't like my current school. It's very small and there's no ventilation. Sometimes it gets really hot, everyone suffocating. Some of the teachers are cool. The ones who teach biology, Spanish and physical education are really cool, and the woman who does the accounts is really nice to me. But the others aren't. I don't like the coordinator, because she treats me badly. If you make a mistake in a class or they see a little bit of crossing out in your exercise book, it's: immediately they register you in the book of faults.<sup>5</sup> Like the last time, they registered my misdeeds<sup>6</sup> – the kids were playing with Professor Chocontá's bicycle and I didn't like them doing it, so I took the bike and I put it in a corner. The coordinator saw

me and said she would note down my misdeeds because I'd taken the bicycle, I'd taken it out of the yard and I'd ridden it, when in fact all I did was take it and put it in its place. They didn't give me a chance to say anything. Whenever I was about to say something they told me to shut up. That's why I don't like my school.

### *My Dad likes his work*

One time some guys on motorbikes got hold of my dad and told him to leave Barranquilla, that if they saw him again at the centre – a great big house where displaced people come and go – they would kill him. My dad was vice-president of the organisation and so they threatened him that we had to leave Barranquilla and if they ever saw him again they'd kill him there and then. Wherever he was and whoever he was with, they'd kill him.

My dad's enjoyed his work since he was 22, that's what he tells me. He spends his time reading books on displacement and all that, on politics. As far as I'm concerned, he should carry on. Despite everything they've done to him, he's doing well. He works with displaced people, he gives them guidance. He looks for help in housing displaced people, and if they want to go home, he helps them return with a security plan. He's always done it, but he keeps us on the sidelines of it. He tells us what happens, but he doesn't say any more. I mean, he'll tell us what he's done each day, but if something awful has happened, he doesn't say. He keeps quiet. Then you realise that something bad has happened. When my sister, the one who's in Cúcuta, had to leave with her husband, he didn't say anything. He cried, but for two months he didn't say anything. It hit him really hard! My sister Ermelina was the apple of his eye, because she worked. If there wasn't any food, she'd get some on credit – even though my dad didn't like it – so that we wouldn't have to go to bed on an empty stomach.

Sometimes I get angry with my dad, but I don't say anything... I let him be, because



I know that he likes to help other people. That's what God told him to do, and so I don't bother him. Sometimes, when things get really difficult, my mum gets angry and starts to tell him off... and he ends up laughing with me.

He's only been to see me play football once here in Bogotá. I was really excited, because it was the first time he'd seen me play. It was a Sunday, and they told me I was going to play for Capital Juniors<sup>7</sup> in Bogotá. My dad came alone, and I was brilliant that day.

My dad is really tolerant of all of us. And respect, he respects us a lot. He and I talk

like friends and he's never punished me. Sometimes he tells me not to do something again, and tells me to keep still. Most of the time when he's writing and I'm distracting him, he tells me to keep still.

For all I know, he could be thinking about going back to Barranquilla. If it comes off for me with Capital Juniors, which I hope will happen this year, I want to stay. And if not, I want to persist. My dream is to play for Barcelona<sup>8</sup>, like Ronaldinho<sup>9</sup>. That's always been my dream.

7 A school football team in the south of Bogotá. 8 A Spanish football team, one of the best in the world. 9 A famous Brazilian football player.





# Ismael\*

## AGE

45 years old.

## BACKGROUND

Peasant farmer.

## DETAILS

A leader both of farmers and of displaced people. He has been forcibly displaced three times.

### *A very, very poor home*

The town where I was born, Aracataca (in Magdalena province), is a very beautiful place. But I didn't only grow up there. We're from a very, very poor background. My dad was a rural labourer and my mum a washerwoman, and there were 14 of us children. So pretty much none of us got an education at the time. We had to work just to keep things going. As each one grew up, he had to work to provide for the younger ones.

So when I was 12 we had to pick cotton, go to the rice fields and harvest the rice, that kind of thing, and that meant we went to go and live up in the mountains, in the Sierra Nevada, away from Aracataca. Later my dad left there and went to La Guajira, and he took all of us with him. I lived in La Guajira, in Mingueo, between the ages of 12 and around 17, 18 - that's where I finished growing up.

### *We all got split up*

When my mum died, we brothers and sisters got split up, separated. Each one went their different way. Some stayed in La Guajira, my oldest brother went to Cesar, some of my sisters went back to Aracataca, another one went to Puerto Berrio, others went to Barranquilla. It was around 1980, and I set off for Bolívar with a friend.

I went to Bolívar because I'd heard lots

of good things about it, and I wanted to go to the place where they held the beauty contest<sup>1</sup>. People were talking a lot about the champion Kid Pambelé<sup>2</sup>, who was from Palenque. I was young and I was anxious to leave, to get to know the city, and so one day myself and a friend went to Cartagena, to a beauty contest.

When we got to Cartagena, we'd been there about three days when a girlfriend of my friend took him to a municipality called María la Baja. I liked it so much there that I stayed, and I made a lot of friends there. I got to know some people from Palenque too, and I started to work with them. "Hey, Guajiro, let's go and do some work!" and off we went.

I said to the man: "Mister, I want to go to Palenque!"

And he said: "Why not? If you want to, let's go to Palenque. What kind of work are you good at?"

"I can do all kinds of work, whatever you like. Anything to do with the countryside, I can do it!" I said. So we went to Palenque and I liked it there even more.

### *They were very fond of me in that town*

It's a very humble place, but it was and still is really lovely, it was great for me at

\* According to the interviewee: "There's a saying on the coast that if one is hanging, it's better to fall. And the peasant says: 'Who talk's about fear after they've been terrified.' That's what it's like for us, so from the beginning I agreed that you could publish my name here. 1 The national beauty contest, a highly popular event held annually in Cartagena. 2 A world boxing champion.

that time. It's a story I really like telling: I arrived there in 1981, around December, and we spent about a week there, getting to know people, partying, having a few drinks. There was lots going on there. After about 11 days we went up to the mountains, where the farm was, and on the very first day I got there, I met María, and when I saw her I said: "Wow!" Let's put it like this: María really impressed me, she bowled me over. So with

the chance of being near her and winning her over and all that, I set to working with lads from Palenque. I went harvesting corn with them, clearing fields, putting up fences, and they paid me every Saturday. And we had some great parties in which I spent the money they paid me!

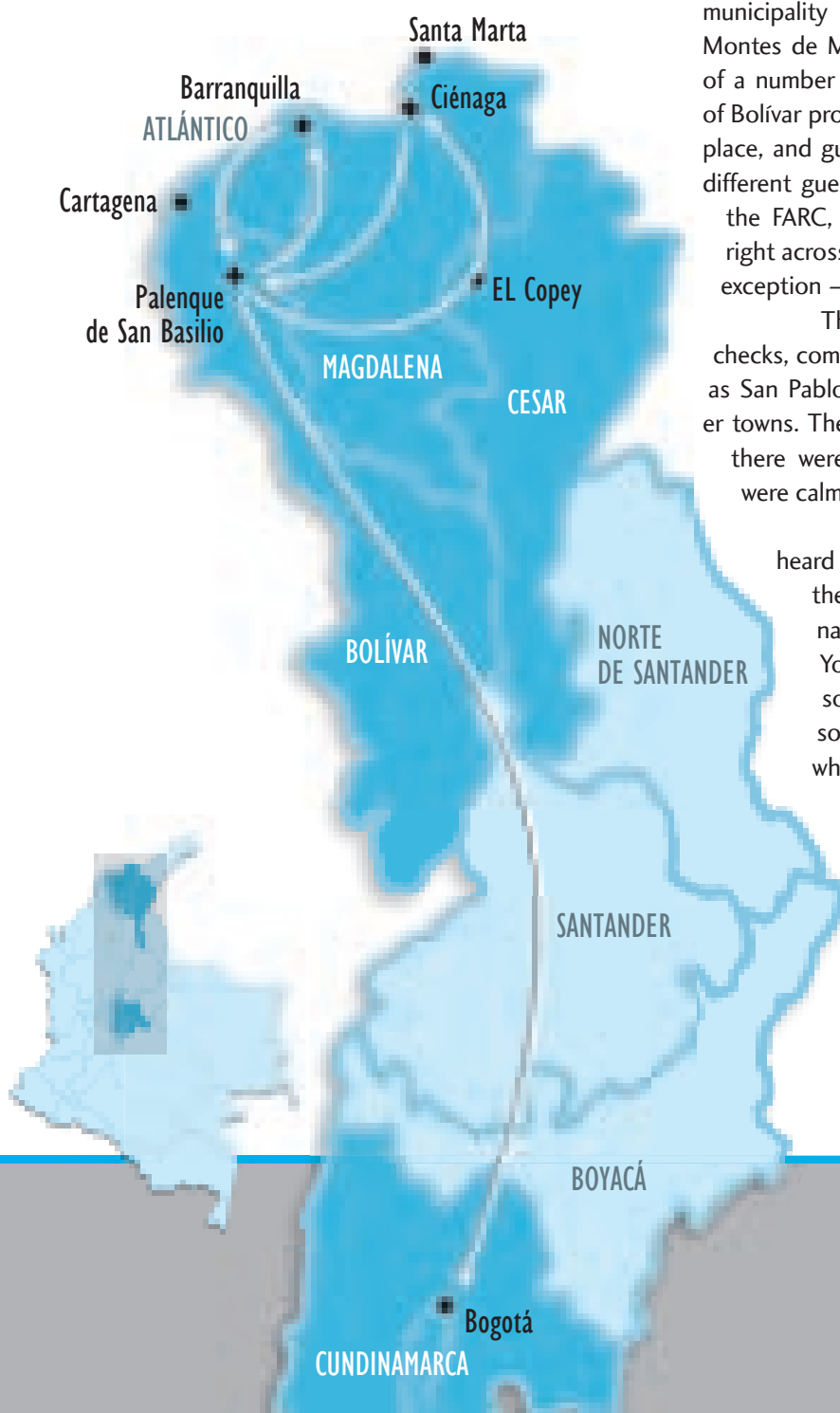
I worked with them for eight years – it was great. There were no problems there, the people were lovely. So there we were, working away, and I got what I wanted – my woman, and that kept me there working even longer. They were very fond of me in that town.

Palenque comes under the jurisdiction of Montes de María. The town is part of the municipality of Mahate, and Mahate is part of Montes de María. Montes de María is made up of a number of municipalities which are all part of Bolívar province. Strategically it's an important place, and guerrilla fronts operate there. All the different guerrilla groups were there – the ELN, the FARC, the EPL, in Montes de María and right across the province. And Palenque was no exception – they came through there too.

They made their presence felt, doing checks, coming down from the mountains as far as San Pablo, San Cayetano and all those other towns. They came down to Palenque too, but there were no problems, no worries. Things were calm.

When I first got there, you never heard mention of anything like that. But then in '85 and '86 they started kidnapping people from the area itself. You began to hear that they'd taken so-and-so, they'd got money out of so-and-so, they'd got money out of who knows who else. But you also got to hear that there were lots of common criminals and that criminal gangs were doing the same sort of thing. The guerrillas were always up there in the hills, they came down to keep a check on the things, to keep order, let's say. They kept order, they got people

## ATLANTIC OCEAN



together, had group meetings, gave talks, all that kind of thing. In the schools, the villages – like La Bonga, Cativa, all those places. But there was no killing, no bodies, nothing like that.

We farmed alongside María's dad. The lads had nothing to complain about, and there was always plenty of work because we had lots of cattle, lots of land. María's dad had about 120 hectares of mountainside...no, not hectares but "cabuyas", a local term equivalent to two hectares. We also had a patch of land up there and we all worked together up there – my brothers-in-law, my cousins and my nieces. We were all thrown in together up there and there was always loads to do. Each one made their clearing, and in the clearing you planted everything – sugar cane, rice, everything. And you have a son, and you say to the son: "OK, I'm not going to the clearing – go here or there and collect a sack of yuca (cassava.)"

The people had their farms there, but the land had been reduced by the state. The area round Palenque has been reduced, because from what I understood when I was there, it used to be enormous, taking in the municipalities of San Juan, San Jacinto and Carmen de Bolívar as far as the doors of the church in Ovejas. From there, it bordered San Onofre. Some of María la Baja was also part of Palenque. All that Palenque's land, including the territory of Mahate. From all that land, all five of the municipalities have been shrinking, because of new legislation from the government, and, moreover, new people moving in, rich people, land-owners who've been buying up people's land, eating away at it. So Palenque is smaller than it was.

#### *There's a committee giving out plots of land*

When I realised that three of the same guys I went to Palenque with were brothers and between them they had three plots of land – one plot each – I asked them: "How did you come by them?"

And they said: "We joined a committee of peasant farmers in the municipality of Mala-

gana, we went to their meetings." Malagana is a town right there near Palenque.

So I asked them: "Why didn't you invite me along?"

And they said: "Because we didn't realise what was going on."

So I said: "Well, seeing as you didn't invite me, I'm going to find out for myself how to get involved." Of course, I was anxious to get a plot - I wanted to have my own land too. So I said to my father-in-law: "I can bring up my children here, but my children won't be able to bring up their families here, will they? That would be too much, so I need to sort something out for myself." So I went and joined a committee in Malagana. Peasant farmers from various areas took part, from other villages such as San Joaquín, Mandinga, Evitar and Mahate, and we had our meetings.

We participated as representatives of Palenque. People began to notice that I went off to the meetings every Tuesday and they asked me what I was up to. So I began to tell the story to people and said: "The thing is, those other guys got a plot of land – there's a committee that's giving out plots." So people from Palenque started joining the committee, and then there were nine or twelve of us. Twelve people who joined the committee and went to the meetings every Tuesday. The meetings were at eight in the evening, and we walked home afterwards at 11 or 12 at night, which took an hour. We walked an hour there, and an hour back again.

The committee took 200 pesos from each of us for the meetings, and one day I thought: "Why do we walk all that way each time and come to the meetings just to bring them 200 pesos? Why don't we go and talk to the people, we can collect the fees in our villages and then just one person can bring it to the meeting, so we all don't have to go. So everyone agreed, and the people from the committee agreed and they said: "Why don't you start a committee and affiliate yourselves directly with Mahate?"

I said: "Sure, let's do that," and we called for a meeting and had it. I remember that 12 peo-

ple came to the first meeting, and among them was Primitivo Pérez. Primitivo was a teacher, one of the lads, and son of one richest families in town. He'd received some training through the national scheme of technical education (Sena) and he knew a lot of things, so he helped us form the first committee. He was secretary and they elected me as president of the Palenque committee.

So I started to call meetings, and we had them every week, on Sundays, but I still went to Malagana every Tuesday too, so that I would know what they were saying and I could report back to our people. By our third meeting, there was no longer 12 of us but 30, then 40 – the committee kept growing. I began to see that the people from Palenque could organise in “kuagros”<sup>3</sup> (old people, young people, everyone) so I began to lead that. I said to them: “The solution here is to reclaim the land, Palenque's land. We're going to reclaim Palenque's land!”

People began to organise themselves under that slogan, and not only the men but the women too. We had 170 people affiliated to the committee – the working men and the women all joined, all the saleswomen too and I began to say that they should start a cooperative for selling sweets<sup>4</sup>.

How could we get credit or other things for our men and women? The rainy season on that part of the coast was really harsh in '87 or '88, a rainy season that destroyed the whole harvest, the hills ran with water and many crops were flooded, and many people had loans from the Caja Agraria – it's called the Banco Agrario these days. As people had loans and they'd lost everything, officials from the bank came to the town to sort things out with the defaulters, those who couldn't pay their debts. As we already had a committee and I was president, we called a meeting with all the peasant farmers – we got them all down into town from the villages for a meeting at which the officials put forward a proposal that the government would give people new loans to pay the old loans off with so that they didn't lose their harvests and all that. As I was their representative

I stood up in the square that day and I told them that we couldn't sign the agreements because it would put people even further into debt. I said to them: “Can't you see? If you've got a loan for 400 and they give another 400, how much will you have to pay? 800! And you've lost your harvest. Who's going to buy it? Have you got any crops left? Haven't you got cattle that drowned? So who's going to buy it? This can't be.”

The officials asked: “So what kind of solution do you want?”

And I replied: “That you cancel these peoples' debts, that you let them off the interest and you wipe out the debt. If you wipe out the debt, then we'll take out new loans, but if the debt isn't wiped out, we're not going to take on new loans. Why? Why should we take out new loans and put ourselves even further in debt?”

So the officials asked if everyone agreed, and the people said: “Yes, what Ismael says, goes. He's our representative.” They didn't come to any agreement, but from that day, I was the town's representative.

### *Everything started to go wrong*

As the motto was to reclaim Palenque's land, we got together with other peasant farmers from San Juan, San Cayetano and San Jacinto and we began to retake land, take it back from the landowners who had it. When that started happening, the landowners started to get organised too.

When the M-19 and EPL guerrillas demobilised in '88 or '89 – in San Pablo, San Cayetano, all over the place – that's when paramilitary groups started appearing and they began to kill the peasant farmers' leaders.

On one of the operations to retake land – we did several at the same time – I went into a farm called Todosonrisa, Palenque land that a drug trafficker<sup>5</sup> had taken. We went there to take back the land from that trafficker.

At the time I was still representative of the Palenque peasant farmers' committee and we pushed on with the struggle for Todosonrisa. At

the same time, we took part in something called the black communities' process. That was something else that the people of Palenque organised themselves in, something more academic - they worked towards the education of the community in official matters. All our companions were there. There were lawyers, teachers, all that kind of thing. That was at the beginning of the '90s, when law 70<sup>6</sup>, the collective land law, was passed. They began to work on the process of awarding land and that strengthened our committee because the law was providing a way for the people of Palenque to get back their land. So our campaign intensified – everyone in Palenque got involved and we went for the land.

At the same time, a dissident group of the Corriente de Renovación Socialista (the Movement for Socialist Renewal) demobilised in Flor del Monte. The EPL went higher up, to Arenitas, which is really close to Montes de María. So what they did, or so it's said, is intercept them in the mountains, and they went off to Urabá. But a few people stayed, and that's when everything started to go wrong. "Why did it start to go wrong?" I'd say it was a problem of social breakdown of those same groups, because ever since then they have massacred people, the leaders, the peasant farmers.

#### *Ever since then they've been after me*

I had a dose of that same medicine, because we had a process going in our village at the time. Under the presidency of César Gaviria [1990-1994] they passed a law offering rewards for guerrilla leaders. If someone caught a guerrilla leader or gave information about them, they got a reward. And because of the reward, people started saying: "You're this or that." And so they'd arrest you, and put you on trial and then lock you up as a guerrilla leader. That's what happened to me. They organised an operation, they set us up there on the farm and they captured me and five other peasant farmers, and none of us knew why. They accused us of rebellion, of terrorism, of murders, assassinations and kidnaps. They

told the people all kinds of things. When we were never involved in those things!

The army, the police, the F2<sup>7</sup>, all the forces were involved, and they tied us up and took us away. They deployed more than 200 armed men to arrest six unarmed peasant farmers! They took us from our houses, they beat us up, they slapped us around, they mistreated us and they brought us to Bogotá. They tied us up and put us on a plane and put us in La Modelo<sup>8</sup> for three months. After three months, we were let out.

I don't even know who got me out, I don't know how I got out of there, whether it was the lawyer or what, because the truth was no one owed me anything. But they got us out and we were left to go free. So we went back home to our plots. Where else were we going to go? We went back to our plots, but life wasn't the same! Nevertheless we carried on trying to organise the community, the community's process, and strengthening community work for the people.

But then the army was all over the place. The military began running checks and inspections, they wanted to come and do training in the community. So I made a statement and I sent it to the armed forces and the Fiscalía<sup>9</sup> and everyone else. In the statement I asked how it could be that when there were lads in our community who'd finished school, but because they didn't have the money they didn't go to university and were working the land instead, when there were people who'd done a semester at university and because they didn't have the money they had to withdraw, why didn't they give money to those people. Or why didn't they train people as teachers? Why did it have to be the military who tackled illiteracy and educated the local people. I said it wasn't lawful, because the military had a specific mission which was to safeguard the national sovereignty and that they should leave the area. So from then on, they were after me and I suffered my first displacement. I left because they were persecuting me, and the people were frightened. "They're going to ruin us, how about that?" So I left. The first time I left, I went to El Copey.

6 A law passed in 1993 "which develops transitional article 55 of the constitution" and recognises the collective land rights of the black communities living on the rivers of the Pacific basin. 7 The Police Intelligence Service and the Office of the Judicial Police and Investigation (DIJIN). 8 A national prison in Bogotá. 9 The Prosecutor General's Office, or the Attorney General's Office, depending on the translation.

That was in '94, something like that. I went to Aracataca and left María there with the kids and then I went to El Copey to work picking cotton. I found myself a good boss there, and later I brought María and I worked there with her. From there we went to a town called Ciénaga (Magdalena) and I worked there for three months and then with the same boss I went to a farm and worked there for seven months. While I was working in El Copey, people from Palenque, people from the community, came to look for me. They asked me to go back, so we could continue with the process. They said they needed leadership and that I should go back. So I paid them heed and I went back again, I went back.

*But the area had been spoiled*

But the area was in a mess, it was ruined. There was death everywhere. I blame the politicians for the damage to the area. For example, Mahate is a municipality with a population of around 50,000. It has access routes, but only tracks – not paved roads. That's also breakdown, because there's raging poverty, but it's not a poverty of production. The land is good and the people are productive. It's a poverty of investment. The people who administer the resources, steal them! So there's no investment and that's why there's poverty and that leads to social breakdown, which divides the community.

Another source of breakdown – although that depends on how you look at it – is the control by the Army. This military control also leads to social breakdown in some way. No one in Palenque really knew what a policeman was until around '89 or '90, when they stationed a battalion there. They were meant to bring more security, but what they actually brought was insecurity. Although they bring control, that control generates a lot of corruption, violations of all sorts. You can't really say of the soldiers...no, they're not saints, they're human too, so they dip their hand in and steal and abuse their power too. So that leads to certain breakdown in the area.

And the other thing is that there is no social investment. What's been done in Palenque, has been done by the people. It's not the work of the state or government, but because we've found other ways of getting some investment. Palenque's education programmes, for example: it's been a struggle by the blacks, by the people supported by other organisations, not only the government.

So because of the campaign we had to reclaim our land. I went back again to the community, and I'd got a bit more experience by then, a bit more guile, I said to my partner: "We're going back to Palenque again, but we're not going to live in Palenque itself – we're going to Cativa." Cativa is a village near Palenque, it's about an hour above, and there's a lovely little farm there that was, or is rather, her grandfather's. All kinds of fruit grew on that farm.

*They killed all those people*

So we went to live and work there. I had a horse and I went down to town and we had meetings and talked to people and brought food. We left by way of San Pablo and lived in Cativa. As it turned out there were – as I said before – groups of Farc guerrillas in Cativa. All the groups are there, though mainly way up high in the Maco hills. So we came down from there because that's where the incursions were, and one day I was at home with my little kids and a group of armed men in uniform passed by. I didn't make out whether they were guerrillas or which group they were from that day, I just saw them pass. You get used to seeing them every day. They pass by your farm, and you just say: "Hello" and that's it. You say "hello" to everyone who passes by.

The next day I went down to town, and a neighbour said: "My friend, didn't you know they can't find that man called Flórez?"

So I said: "Which one?"

And he replied it was Aurelio. "Yes, some group or another passed by and they took him and killed him." Then I went to another neigh-



bour and found out something else. They'd gone to the farm of a family, people you had to draw the words out of if you wanted to speak to them, people from out in the wilds, who didn't know a thing - they'd turned up, taken them all and killed them. Killed them, and from what I could find out, the vultures ate them, because there wasn't anyone to go and collect their bodies.

That's how I found out that there were groups going round killing people. And you presume that, because you're used to seeing the guerrillas around, that it was the guerrillas doing the killing and everyone kept quiet.

So I'm out and about, and about three days later, they pass by with a lad they've taken. As the lad knew me, he said: "Ismael, give me water!" And I gave him some water, I gave the lad water, and as they saw me give him water, they said: "You too, come with us! Get your shovel and your pick, and come with us!" So I got my shovel and my pick, and I followed them. When we'd gone about a hundred metres, they said: "Dig there!" So we started to dig, me with the pick and the lad with the shovel, and when the hole was about knee deep, they said: "Stop there!" When they said "stop there", I wanted to... my stomach ached...good grief, I tell you, my hair stood on end. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. They had two guys there, two here, another one there, and we were just two standing there. In front of us there were two of them, and one said to the other: "Put yourself over there." So I grabbed the pick - I already had it to hand - I grabbed the pick and whack! I hit one of them with it. The man fell and I, well, I started running. I was off like a shot, doing somersaults as if I was a ball. I ran and I ran, and they fired three times and me running, running - bang! bang! - I kept running...and I lost them. I didn't stop running for three or four hours, and then I felt I'd run enough. I was tired, dog-tired, and so I kept still. I couldn't hear any more shots or anything, so I just kept still.

And then it started to rain, a big storm with lightning and blowing a gale. It was about six

in the evening, and bit by bit, making lots of detours, I made my way home to find my kids. I got there and I took my children, I got the donkey I kept there, saddled her up and put them in the saddle. María wasn't there, so I grabbed a pair of rubber boots and said: "No questions, we're leaving!" So we left in the midst of the storm, and we had to cross the swollen river, and open up paths in the jungle through the rocks, through everything, with this donkey until we got to the road. We got to town about one in the morning, dirty and exhausted and the kids soaked all night. But I didn't tell anyone anything that had happened.

I still thought it was the guerrillas and I asked myself: "How could that be?" But anyway, I went to town and I fell ill. The pressure, something to do with stress, I don't know, but I got thinner and thinner and the people kept asking: "What's wrong with you, Ismael?"

#### *"Where do I go from here?"*

Things kept ticking along, and I relaxed. That same year, I left the mountain and stayed in town. I concentrated on finishing my schooling and I had no desire to go back to the hills. I said to myself: "I can't go back there, but where can I go?" I'd got six children by then, all of them small. "Where could I go from here?" My work was in the countryside so I said: "Good grief, is it a good idea to go back to the wilderness with all my animals now dispersed? So I went to work on our plot of land. I went back to our plot. I got a loan from the bank for four million pesos and I bought some cattle. I started working again with cattle, keeping my clearing, and finishing my schooling on Saturdays in San Pablo (Bolívar). It was about forty minutes by car from San Pablo to Palenque. That was in 1997.

So I said to María: "You can finish your schooling here too, so we'll be properly trained. I'll do mine first and then you do yours. It'll be better that way. And there we were, in harmony, living amid all the things that were going on, but not paying it any attention, because it wasn't affecting me, it was nothing to do with me. Well

perhaps it has to do with you, but you tell yourself: "It has nothing to do with you." That's the dilemma you find yourself in.

In August 1997, I was in school in San Pablo: the coordinator at the school from Carmen de Bolívar and a teacher from Sucre who was also a coordinator and myself went out together. The coordinators had come from a meeting with the mayor of Mahate. I don't know what it was about, but they'd been in a meeting. At the edge of Palenque there's a neighbourhood called Palenquito – all along the main road there are kiosks, run by people who live there at the side of the road – and so I left school and I saw them at one of the kiosks, and they shouted: "Come here, Ismael, come and have a beer!"

But I said: "No thanks, if you had food you wouldn't invite me, but no beer for me. I'm really hungry, so I won't have a beer. I'm going home." And off I went. I paid them no attention, and I didn't wait for the car. I sent off calmly on foot. And it turns out that group turned up and they took the coordinators and the teachers with them. They took them away, they took them away ...and they've never been seen since.

*"Who could those armed men be?"*

So I was at home in Palenque. I didn't go to the classes on Saturdays, I didn't go out. That year I made a good clearing, right there in town, because someone gave me some really good land to work and I worked it. I sowed corn, yuca (cassava) and ñame (yams). I tell you no lies, that was my year, my lucky year. That was the year I might have settled down. I had a loan, I had cattle, I had my plot of land and a house. I had that great clearing I'd made good and everyone admired it.

When I got up one morning – as my mother-in-law lived a way off, I'd get up in the morning and head over there, and suddenly I saw a guy coming the other way. He was wearing white shorts, trainers, a t-shirt without sleeves and had a sack over his shoulder. I got close to him to take a look, because he was odd, he was from the in-

terior. In Palenque everyone's black, but this guy was completely white. I got closer and I realised that under his sack, he was carrying guns. I went and sat on the edge of the path. I kept alert, I went to work and the guy left. That night, about seven in the evening, a Toyota came into town, a red Toyota. I wasn't at home, I was at a neighbour's and I saw that there were six people in the vehicle, all of them in shorts. And I said to myself: "These people, armed to the teeth, who are they? It must be the army on an operation!" The vehicle went up towards La Bonga, behind it went an army truck and that night we slept peacefully.

The next day I went in to town, to the square, and I got there and I saw that there were notices on the lampposts that read: "Infantry Battalion No. 3. Members of the community, if you'd be so kind: we are pleased to inform you that if you see anything suspicious in the community, please telephone this number or that." And I said: "What's all this about? Then, on top of that, the guerrillas appeared in force and paf! They kidnapped some people from the town. And so the whole thing got really screwed up!

*"You're top of the list!"*

But as the saying goes: "If you don't owe anything, you've got nothing to fear." It was August 3, and I was at home, when one of the richest men in town turned up and he said: "Mr Ismael, you're a really good man, a hardworking person, honest and serious. From the day you arrived in this town, you've worked for its people. But I'm sorry to tell you something – there are many people in this town who don't like you. You think that I'm one of them. You suspect me and I can't stand it. I have to tell you. Why don't you do us a favour and leave? Get out of here! Take your family if you want to. Or leave them if you prefer. Do what you like, but get out of here! I tried to ask him why, but he just said: "Don't ask me why. I'm just obeying orders by saying this to you." So I started to think, and I said to myself that this was someone who was jealous of me, who saw me

as an obstacle, and wanted to see the back of me. So I didn't leave. I stayed there.

Despite what the man had said, I stayed, and as always I went to work early each morning. So it was about eight in the morning, and I was having a walk when my father-in-law came along. He said the same thing, and I said: "But what's going on, Mr Niño?" But he didn't want to say. Then someone passed by and said the same thing again. So I said: "What's going on? That guy said it, and then another one and now you're telling me the same thing. What's happening?"

And he said: "Well, the thing is, a group of men came into town and they got everyone together. They were asking for information and they were talking about you...and you're on the list!"

"What do you mean? What list?" I asked.

"Yes, they had a list, with a load of different people's names on it, and you're at the top of the list!" he replied.

I went straight to María and said: "Guess what?" And I told that this and that had happened. "We're not going to be silly about this," I said. "You're not going to let yourself be killed and nor am I. We know the score, we've already been warned and we're not going to allow ourselves to die a miserable death here. Tonight, take the kids and put them to bed at your mum's and then go and wait at someone else's house. I'll stay here until seven o'clock and then I'll go and we'll leave the house empty. I'm going to leave, but let's sort out some money and a way to protect our things here, and then I can go."

So what did we do? The clearing was nearby, and at seven o'clock I went there as if I'd been coming from town. From there I went home and then left in a different direction and went up into the hills. From there I could see everything that was going on. And of course! They came by night, the army and the paramilitaries. The paramilitaries were armed but dressed in civilian clothes. The army went first and behind them the others. Then the army pulled back, and the paramilitaries started attacking people, and killing

them and...all quiet on the front! The army hadn't seen anything or participated in anything!

### *I'm off. I'm going to be next!*

The next day, I said to María: "I'm leaving on the third." They'd already killed a lot of people in town – they'd killed the two teachers, another guy in San Pablo, and two friends who had been with me. They killed Maneco – the guy with the kiosk – on August 3. When they killed Maneco and I heard the news that they were heading out of town, I said to María: "I'm off because I'm next. You stay here – I'm going to leave under their noses, through town."

So I made out as if I was going to the clearing with my machete, as if I was going to work somewhere else. I left at seven, eight in the morning, and I said to María: "You leave by , a different way, and take the container you sell the sweets from with my clothes in it. We'll meet at the Amparo petrol station in Cartagena, and from there I'll leave. I'm not going to stay in Cartagena, I'll go to Barranquilla and once I'm there I'll think about where we can go next. Whether we move on or stay there. We'll see how it works out." So that's what we did, and on the way I sold a cow. I went to a slaughterman and said: "Go and find the cow. I'll tell you where it is, but give me the money here." So he gave me 70,000 pesos. I gave María 50,000 and I left with 20,000.

I got to Cartagena and after a little while María turned up. We said our goodbyes, I went to Barranquilla and she went back again to the kids. I said to her: "OK, we're not to ring each other or anything. We'll have to wait until you can send me a message with someone, or I can send you one." So I arrived in Barranquilla. I had a brother there, but I said to myself: "I'm not going to my siblings' place. What would I do there? Bring them problems. How about María's siblings? No, not them either. So where shall I go? Well, I suppose there is María's brother, and I've got to go somewhere." So I went to María's brother's place. He's called Lázaro. I didn't need to tell him my story. They

already knew what was going on – they’d seen it all on TV, in the papers. They asked me: “Where are you going to go, mate?”

“I came here to spend a few days and then I’m going back home.” I said. And so I spent four or five days there. On the fifth day María came to Barranquilla, to see whether she was going to join me or not and we spent the night there. They lived in a little house made out of planks in the Nueva Colombia neighbourhood. That and the Me Quejo neighbourhood are both part of Barranquilla, but they are colonies of people from Palenque. Lots of people from Palenque went there. So there we were, and then one of María’s sisters turned up and she said to her brother; “Why have you got María’s husband here. You know he’s got problems – maybe they’ll come and look for him here and then they’ll kill everyone.”

Shit! That made me feel pretty bad. You come here with problems, and you can’t even find refuge here. So what am I meant to do? There was another of María’s sisters there so I told her what was going on and I said I had to find a way of bringing María here: “she has to come here because back at home everyone is leaving.”

It was around the time of the campaign for the mayoral elections, and Father Hoyos was a candidate, and so María’s sister said to me: “There’s a woman who’s giving out plots of land for votes. If you’ve got the right to vote, let’s register you with your ID card and then we’ll go and see her and sort out a plot and you can build a little house on it.”

“Well if you guys can get me the vote, I’ll go for it!” I said. I worked out that there were seven people and with those seven people I could get a plot, so that same day I went to find the woman and register my ID card.

So I went with my two sisters-in-law and while we were sitting in the woman’s house a lad turned up who’s called, or was called Iván Gómez. “Brother, what are you doing here?” he asked.

“Mate, things have been happening, this and that...” I said, and I told him what was going on.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Now you’ve met me it will be OK.”

He was part of the campaign, as a candidate to become an edil (spokesman of the community). So we got to know each other and started going round together.

#### *How can I bring María here?*

I’d been in Barranquilla about two weeks, when news came that the “paras” [paramilitaries] had gone into Palenque. They’d taken Emeterito the shopkeeper and killed him. He was just a lad from the interior who had a shop. They turned up, grabbed him and killed him in the town square. They were looking for El Mono too, the son of the man who had warned me about being on the list. He had a shop too. He escaped because he wasn’t there at the time, but as they found one of his uncles, they took him instead and killed him in the square too. They apparently killed three people there that day.

They went looking for me too at the house where I used to live. María was there when the paramilitaries turned up and she stood up to them. She said: “Yes, he lives here. He was my husband, but that man left a while ago, because he wasn’t from Palenque. So he doesn’t live here with me anymore - he just left me with all these kids. Look at all these kids. He left, and I don’t know where he went! I don’t know where he is.” And in the end they left her alone, because she was crying as she spoke to them.

When I heard about it, I said: “If hadn’t come here, I’d be dead now.” That motivated me even more to find a way of getting María here, and I stuck close to that lad, my new friend. I went everywhere with him, because he’d said he was going to help me get a place. One day he took me out on the campaign and he took me to see some plots.

Every day I got changed and went to his house, in the morning, in the afternoon, whenever I could and I began to work on his programme, coordinating things, helping with the campaign. One day we made a date to meet on Sunday at

the Rincón Latino at nine in the morning. The Rincón Latino is in the Rebolo neighbourhood. It's where Father Hoyos said his Masses, where he gave political speeches and every Sunday, people, his supporters, flooded to the area. So Iván said: "Let's make a date to meet at the Rincón Latino."

We'd spoken just the night before. He'd given me the 2000 pesos to pay for my travel, and I was going to wait for him there. I got up the next day, had a wash and set off for the Rincón Latino. I was one of the first there. I got there around nine and the Mass didn't start until nine thirty. So I got myself a seat. They were still empty, so I took one at the front because I liked the speeches Father Hoyos gave and I wanted to be able to hear him properly.

So the place was filling up, filling up with people. Ten o'clock passed and then eleven, but Iván didn't show up! I looked all over the place for him and I thought: "Well, isn't he coming or what?" And then I saw a man get up onto the stage and say that the day's events had been cancelled, because they'd just killed the man who hoped to become the leader of Nueva Colombia, Iván Gómez.

"What!" I said. It felt as if I'd been lifted up in the air, and then dropped to the ground... whack!

I jumped up and ran with everyone else, the people from the neighbourhood, running back home. When we got back, they'd already collected his body. It was at the funeral home. They killed him at about eight or nine o'clock in the morning. They killed him.

So I went to the funeral home. Everyone was there, going in, coming out and then one of his brothers pointed at me and said: "It was he who killed him!"

*"What do you mean?" I said.*

And he replied: "It was a black man, he looked just like you. You're the one who went looking for him every day."

"Yes," I said. "I'm the one who went

looking for him each day, because he was helping me and I was campaigning with him." And then he started fighting with me. So I had to go the DAS<sup>10</sup> and the Fiscalía [Attorney General's Office] and go through that whole process, because those people were trying to implicate me in Iván's death. We got everything cleared up, sorted matters out. We got over it and we buried Iván.

I took part in the wake and then we buried him. I was all over the place, really messed up. "Now where was I going to go?" I had nowhere to go – my brother-in-law didn't want me there, and neither did my sister-in-law...and then I hooked up with another friend, a guy from Sucre who was a friend of Iván's too. He made a living selling "tamales"<sup>11</sup>. We made "envueltos"<sup>12</sup> and we sold milk, butter and sour cream. I got really, really thin. I was all over the place. After all that had happened, with no work, and with my friend quarrelling every day to get me to go out and sell. My friend was all over the place too, thinking about what happened to Iván and all that...you come here to get away from that kind of thing, and you get caught up in something else in the city!

*We'll give you a plot  
of land for your family*

So I met up with another friend, a friend of the guy who sold sour cream. They were both friends of Iván and they knew about land. So they said to me: "Look mate, you're all over the place and we've got some land...if you like we'll give you a little plot. Because of what you've told us - I told them the whole story – we've give you the land so that you can bring your family here." So they took me to the place and gave me a little plot of six by twelve metres. The lads gave it to me. It was an invasion, but I didn't realise that. I just saw the land and thought it belonged to the lads.

I sent a message to María telling her to come and see what it was like. And then a few days later I was round at my neighbour's house, a friend of mine, which was only half built. I was talking to a girl and I had my back to the street.

10 Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, the national security service. 11 A snack made of corn, vegetables meat wrapped in plantain leaves. 12 A sweet snack made from a paste of corn, butter sugar and eggs wrapped in corn cob leaves.

She was facing me. I don't know why but I turned around and saw another girl go by. I paid her no attention and carried on talking to the other one. But then something made me get up and go to the door and I saw her talking to a guy. It didn't look like María, I didn't recognise her! Afterwards she said she'd seen me too but didn't recognise me either. I said to myself: "Wow, that looks like María," and I went out into street and walked towards her. I was about ten metres away, and I thought: "I'm going to walk past and see." So I walked passed, and it looked like her, but at the same time it didn't. I thought: "I know her," and then: "No I don't." So I went up to her and I said: "Hey, aren't you María?"

"Yes," she said.

And I said: "Oh, María, look how we've ended up!" We were both so thin. María had always been a bit plump, but we were just skin and bones, so much so that we didn't recognise each other. We gave each other a hug, and we started crying, crying there in the street. We were both wasted away. So I told her everything, and I told her about the little plot, and she said: "Take me and show me where it is." So I took her, and she told me how things had been back home, the persecution, that they'd killed this lad, and that one, and another one.

Shit! "We can't go back there," I said. So we started to make plans.

"What shall we do?" we asked ourselves, and I said: "OK, as we've got this plot, let's sell two cows and we can use the money to build something here. You can come straight away. Bring the kids and take them to Yudi's house. Get all our things together and tell Basilio to remove everything for you, so it doesn't look as if you're moving house, as if you're coming here. That way you won't leave a trail.

So that's what happened. María left, and I stayed behind, calmer now. About three days later, María came back with the six kids. By then I'd been in Barranquilla nearly five months – from August to December. It gets really windy there in December, and we didn't have a roof over

our heads or anything! But María brought the money with her from the cows, and so we said: "Let's go down to our new place." I told the kids it was a farm, so that they didn't feel as if they'd been displaced, so that they felt as if they'd come from one hillside to another and they could run around freely there.

María and I cleared the plot, dug a trench and built a shack. We slept there for five days out in the open. We put down our sheets, put sweaters on and we slept under the stars. It was summer in Barranquilla, so there was lots of sunshine. And as it didn't rain and there was lots of wind, we woke up in the mornings dusted in sand. There was lots of gossip around, but no one bothered us. I carried on putting up our walls. I brought timber, and working on it all every day. Then one day, a friend made us some blocks, and I befriended an old lady who gave us 300 more. I collected rocks with the kids, and bit-by-bit we built our house. We bought cement and made a room and then bought roofing and put it on and so on...

"So what were we going to do? We had to work, but at what? So I said to María: "Since I've been here, I've been selling 'tamales' and 'envueltos'. We'll make 'tamales' and sour cream, and I'll sell them." So María made them, and we started to look for shops to sell them in. We bought a big pot, and after we'd set up there we didn't work the land any more because we were running our own business. We made the 'envueltos', a hundred, two hundred, up to three hundred and then we sold them for 100 pesos each. That gave us enough to get by. María and I milled the corn and made the 'envueltos' and sold the sour cream in the afternoon, and in the mornings we got up early and cooked "the envueltos." As we had good firewood, we used that and they cooked quickly. And by eight o'clock in the morning, we had cash in our pockets. We were putting in 10,000 pesos and getting 20,000 - 25,000 back out, so we had enough to feed the kids and no one had to go hungry. We were dedicated to that.

### *I realised I'd been displaced*

So we kept going like that until January, and when January came round there was the question of enrolment at school. I began to think: "Aren't there any schools round here? Where can I enrol the kids? What am I going to do?"

And the others, my friends, said: "Well, go to the town hall, mate! Go to the town hall so you can secure a place at school for your kids." So I went to the town hall, and I met a friend who worked there, and I explained the situation to her and she said: "No problem, you need to tell me where the nearest school is where you want them to study and you'll have to make a declaration<sup>13</sup>. As you're displaced you'll have to sign a declaration." She helped me organise it all, and said that once I'd given the declaration, I had to bring the document to her and with that she could reserve places for the kids in school. She worked for the education department, and it was only really then that I realised I'd been displaced!

I mean, it had been more than six months, nearly a year, and I didn't realise I'd been displaced because I didn't know that displacement existed. I think there were lots of people who didn't realise that displacement existed. When I was displaced, it was just after the Salado massacre, the first one. So I went to the Defensoría<sup>14</sup> in Barranquilla and I started hanging out with people and I realised there were other displaced people too. So I asked them: "Where have you been displaced from?"

Some said: "From Carmen," and others: "From Chocó." Someone else said: "From Villavicencio."

And I said: "Ah, it's happening all over the country!" Cesar was more affected than anywhere else.

That's when I started to get involved in organising things again. I kept on with the woman from the town hall. She was in Father Hoyos's party, and she invited me to go to his events. So I kept going to them, and I invited another friend along. And then I realised that there were loads of displaced people! There were five or six hundred

people displaced from all over the country. How did I not know that before!

So with the declaration I managed to get the kids enrolled. And once I'd enrolled them, then every so often, pretty much everyday, they'd complain that the others, the other schoolkids, kept saying they were displaced people and because they were black with curly hair, they gave them a hard time: "What are those curls all about?" So my kids starting fighting with the others, and then the teachers said that they were violent because they were displaced, that because they'd been displaced by violence that's how they'd learned to cope with the war, that's why they behaved like that. And the kids came home crying. Why did they say things like that to them?

So I had to go to the school to bring the situation to the attention of the rector. Of course, I stood up and asked how we could be to blame, how were we - the peasant farmers - the guilty ones, when we'd been forced to leave our land where we were doing fine. That was enough to stop it happening, but my children still suffered that shock, and they hated it when people said they were displaced people. I felt bad to. I said: "Why do I have to be displaced in my own country? Why can't I go back to my own land, not even think about going back? Because you think you're going to die!"

### *Help from the people themselves*

Despite all the things that have happened to us, there is also one good thing. When you arrive in the city, you feel bad because you don't know where to go, you don't know who's going to take you in, you get treated really badly ... but there are some people who, when you arrive and explain the situation, they give you strength, they welcome you, whether out of pity or generosity. And who is it that gives that welcome? The poorest people of the city, because you arrive in the poorest neighbourhoods. You turn up and you find good people there, people who give you support. They show solidarity with you.

<sup>13</sup> A document demanded by the Red de Solidaridad Social, or Social Solidarity Network - known today as Acción Social - as evidence of a person's status as displaced, and which allows access to services and aid. <sup>14</sup> The Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman.

That's a good thing. If it wasn't like that, more to the point, what would happen to displaced families? There are others who turn up in the city centre. I've seen them – displaced companions, families with their small children begging, because they haven't got any relatives there or anything. I've seen so many cases, so many cases, but in each one, the family's drama unfolds in its own way. I sorted things out the way I did because, without realising that I was displaced, I concentrated on resolving my own problem with my family, working on it myself.

It means scraping a living together, selling things, finding a way to get by, and that way you don't burden other people with your problems. You take responsibility for your own things! I never went looking for food packages at the Red<sup>15</sup>. They never gave me those kits<sup>16</sup> or anything like that because I didn't know they gave you provisions. The declaration and the kids' school places are the only favour anyone did me. Nothing else.

In the letter - I'm reading the letter now - it said we had a right to good health, but I said: "Each one looks after their own health here. The kids are never ill, nor María or I either. We've never gotten sick in Barranquilla, we don't worry about it. But I did still worry about the process of getting organised, because there were displaced people everywhere ... There were displaced people everywhere, and they were complaining: "Give me some provisions!" That's when I realised that there was a Pastoral Social<sup>17</sup> and that people went there in search of provisions. I know my way around the city now and I've started to get to know what Barranquilla is like, from going to the centre with the "envueltos". As our neighbourhood is out on farmland, I didn't realise what the centre was like. I went out selling with a bucket, and just walked. I walked and walked, to get to know the place. Sometimes I'd get lost for three or four hours and to get back I'd have to ask directions. So with the business of the "envueltos" I got to know the city, and we had about 20 shops who took them.

### *Displacement should be acknowledged*

The round that I did to distribute the "envueltos" allowed me to get to know the city and what the atmosphere was like. I distributed the "envueltos" and by nine in the morning I was free. I gave the money to María and kept 2000 pesos and I went to the centre to encourage the displaced people. I went to the government, to the town hall, to the Pastoral Social and I realised that the Red existed.

In the town hall, I realised that although there were so many displaced people in Barranquilla, the city didn't acknowledge that it had them. They didn't know about law 387<sup>18</sup> either. With other displaced people from other parts of the country, I began to meet leaders and lots of people began setting up organisations for displaced people, and I realised that those kind of organisations existed, that they had meetings and got things done.

So at the Rincón Latino, I set up an association with people from Salado, from San Jacinto, from the same Montes de María region. The first association I set up we called Acudevio, Displaced Citizens of Colombia. And that's how we called it, without knowing anything about anything. But we gave it that name so we could organise ourselves, and we made a lad who said he came from Urabá the president, and with some others from round there, from Cesar, we started getting it going and we said: "Right, as part of this process we have to do something that gets recognition at the national level of the problem of displacement here in Barranquilla."

From what I knew there weren't any displaced people in Barranquilla, you didn't get the armed conflict here, that was in other places and Barranquilla was a receiver city. It wasn't known as a city where there was any displacement, it was supposed to be the "oasis of peace" on the [Caribbean] coast.

So we started to campaign and we went ahead with the election of a spokesman to represent us on a committee at the district council<sup>19</sup>. There was a big meeting – about 900 peo-



ple participated. We did the vote at the Rincón Latino and the people elected me. I gave a speech that day and they elected two of us. I was the first representative of the displaced people on the district council and as such I began to campaign for recognition, for help for those affected, but as there wasn't an agreement or anything, there wasn't any help. Something had to be done.

### *The start of direct action*

'97 and '98 went by, and in 1998 we took over Plaza de la Paz<sup>20</sup>. We organised it saying: "OK, all the organisations are going, but we're going to unite them all together." So we set up another organisation called Asodeta – the Association of Organisations of the Displaced People of Atlántico – and it was from then that we started to win recognition of the fact that there were displaced people in Atlántico province. And why did they start to acknowledge it? Because of the pressure we applied.

We didn't really get anything out of the takeover of the square, but as a result of it they killed two companions from Urabá. They killed Víctor, and another guy nicknamed *Tribilín*. They killed them right there and then. Everyone else was still there, and I said: "Yes, it's two more deaths, but we must keep going!" The people were trying to disperse and they didn't do anything else, but no! We must keep going, we will keep going!

That year, in June, we did another takeover, this time of the Pastoral Social, because there was still no acknowledgment of the need for humanitarian aid in Barranquilla, and housing even less so. And people were coming from all over – from Sur de Bolívar and a town called Las Palmas (Bolívar), which is in San Jacinto. That place became a ghost town and more than 4,000 people were displaced. In 2000 there was a new displacement from Salado and a few more people arrived. And none of them received any help or anything, no one would attend to them, they just fled. They fled and looked for refuge where they could find it, tried to unwind and put their lives

back together. Each one had to find a way of resolving their own problems!

So we organised the takeover of the Pastoral Social with the aim of securing humanitarian aid for the people, but further than that, we wanted to find a solution to their housing problems. But nothing came of that either, so a group of us organised a get together of seventeen organisations. Of the seventeen, six agreed with our plan for more direct action, so we reclaimed a piece of land, a shanty town for displaced people, and we renamed it Ciudadela de Paz<sup>21</sup>. We saw that we could build our own little houses there, and with them we started to attend to the housing problem. There were sixty-six hectares of land and we had about 300 families, each one with their own problems, and each day more and more families arrived, more and more families.

The land wasn't in a great location – it was good for building but not for cultivating. The soils of Atlántico are very salty, and what's more it was just behind the oxygenation pools of the AAA<sup>22</sup>, where they process the waste water and sewage from the city. So the district council didn't want to accept our being there, because we were in an area of risk, the environment, the air was very polluted, and it smelled really bad. But by forcing the issue, the district council gave us another piece of land further away for us to relocate to and we built another shanty town called Pinar del Río. So went to live there, but it was tough. We saw worse things than we'd seen before. There were 280 displaced families, each with their own problems, their troubles, but at least they managed to save themselves having to pay rent and could establish themselves. But they lived in terrible conditions, really really bad.

When we began to negotiate so that the district council would accept us, the organisation split. Some said they would go and live in Pinar del Río, but others not, which caused some controversy within the organisation. And things were made worse because the armed groups began to infiltrate the place, and gain influence there. The "paracos", the paramilitaries came and

did checks, and there were pamphlets and guidance and orders from the Farc. There was uproar, a “tutti-fruti”, as they say on the coast there.

There were people from all over the place, and even common criminals began operating there. In 2001 there were five killings in the shanty town in one night, on top of the struggle for power that existed among people from the community. So when those people were killed, in July 2001, we disbanded the Asodeta organisation and created the Barranquilla branch of Andescol. At that time there were loads of checks and control, but we planned various projects.

The people from the Presbyterian church, who worked a lot with us, and the people from Justicia y Paz<sup>23</sup> helped us with a project. And we had another project to provide free-range chickens, laying hens. One day when I was there taking care of the chickens and the hens, they (armed men) went looking for me in the shanty town, and there was a shoot-out there, but I wasn't there. I was spared again that day. So I kept on with the process, with the struggle, but when they brought out the dead, I decided I didn't want to stay full-time in the community, that I'd live in the city, but I wouldn't go so much to the neighbourhood. I spent my time in other neighbourhoods, because of the situation. But as I had commitments with Andescol, with the process of organisation in Barranquilla, it was good. Apart from the shanty town, we also had work organising people in other neighbourhoods such as La Central and La Candelaria and in Loma Roja, in various parts of Barranquilla. And that allowed me to work with displaced people, but at the same time I didn't go so much to the shantytown.

#### *The children escape your clutches*

So we continued our struggle to keep going: families looking for projects, the women looking for something to do, for work. Some did washing, others made sweets and others did cleaning – whatever was going, but always managing to put food on the table. But the children

were the problem, a headache for the families because they think life's all about dancing, playing, going out, jumping around and listening to champeta<sup>24</sup> and all that music. They don't take any notice of anyone, and any bit of money they get is for partying on Saturdays...and that partying causes problems!

I even had clashes with the people from Bienestar Familiar<sup>25</sup>, with people from the university, because it made me angry the way they told the kids, the young people, our children, to – as they put it – look after themselves! It didn't seem right to me that they told them to look after themselves, told the girls to not let the boys get them pregnant, not to let them touch you there, and if they were going to do anything to use contraception, condoms, the pill and I don't know what else. It made me angry...it made me angry because back at home that kind of thing didn't happen to the kids. Back home, when you were old enough, you did it and that's it – it all got sorted out...if it happened, it happened. So that didn't seem right to me. There were vices all over the place in the city, marijuana and all that, but back at home you never saw those kind of things. If someone wanted to smoke a bit of marijuana – if they wanted to! – they kept it hidden. But in the city they get the youngsters hooked, telling them not to get involved in that kind of thing, but it turned out that because the kids had never done it publicly before or they didn't even know about it, it became a chaos in the shanty town – the kids want to smoke marijuana and drink liquor. And then things degenerate, and they start attacking buses and cars and that causes an awful lot of breakdown among the displaced people. It became a huge problem, a constant battle for everyone, for all the families, not only with their own children but with those of the other families that had been displaced. That meant that I, at least, clashed with some of the institutions.

One of the things that was toughest for me, really tough, that made me really sad was that since we'd arrived in Barranquilla, one of my children I'd taken with me, when he was 11 or 12,

started behaving like a calf loose in the field. He started walking all over the place, and he'd come home late at night. As we lived in a shack he could get out and I had no way of controlling him and he was out in the street – it frightened me. I had to get up at 10 or 11 at night and look for him. I took him there, and enrolled him in fifth grade. But once he'd finished sixth grade he didn't carry on studying. He didn't want to continue going to his classes anymore, he said he wasn't going to do any more studying, that he was through with it. He became a real rebel. He did bad things at school, to the teachers and in the end they wouldn't have him there anymore and he stopped studying. That really brought me down.

The two girls carried on studying and they finished their primary school. Then, when they'd finished fifth grade and were in sixth, one of them fell in love with one of those lads from Barranquilla, one those who wore big baggy shorts and had a ring and that was it – she left. That was another big blow for me. I was left with the other children, looking desperately for a solution, and then one day I went out to go to a meeting and when I came back, the other girl had gone! She left with a guy from Carmen de Bolívar. I don't know whether he was a displaced person or not. All I know is that she chucked in school and she left.

My kids really defeated me. It was the cruellest thing that could have happened to me, because I never imagined that my children would go that way, choose that fate as people say. I'd wanted to bring my children up on the farm, bring them up and educate them in same way as me, as a child who was obedient and worked hard. But no, there your children escaped your clutches, they became disobedient, they did the same as everyone else in the city and they didn't obey anyone. They came and went, and it seemed like a bad thing – too much liberty – a really bad thing. That's been the toughest thing for me, the thing I've hated most. It made me feel bad, and I think it'll affect me as long as I live because I wasn't able to do what I wanted to for my children in life. That's what hurts me most still.

But life goes on, it rushes on. So I kept going, continued with the process of organising displaced people, displaced people with families, having trouble with their own families.

*My work with the displaced becomes more difficult*

So we carried on working with displaced people. It went well, there were lots of people who helped us, who collaborated with us. Many churches showed solidarity with the displaced, the Presbyterian church helped them a lot, along with some regional institutions from Atlántico. A woman gave our organisation a house to look after, so we took it on and set up a centre there which received families who had been recently displaced. We let them stay there until we could help them find somewhere to live.

Displaced people's organisations in Barranquilla suffered persecution, and especially ours. I don't know if it was because of the shanty towns or what, but there was harassment and many accusations. Many displaced people were disappeared, many were killed as well. For example in 2003, they killed five fellow displaced people in the shanty town and left the women widows and the children fatherless. That's the kind of thing we've lived through. Many displaced companions have been put on trial. They came from somewhere else and when they arrive, they have a record it turns out. Many were detained too.

In 2004, a really good thing happened, because people from the Simón Bolívar University had launched a project working with displaced people. They made friends with us, and we suggested that they worked on the displacement observatory that was enshrined in law, because we wanted an end to displacement in Colombia, to find a way to prevent it from happening, to make sure people knew about it so it could be stopped. Those were the things that interested us, and, in the university, we got support from the professor of sociology Alfredo Correa de Andreis<sup>26</sup>.

The professor began a project with us,

26 A sociologist and university professor, who was assassinated along with his bodyguard in Barranquilla on September 17 2004, allegedly by a paramilitary group.

which he called: “Meetings and misunderstandings of the displaced population.” If someone had been displaced, he wanted to know where they’d come from, where they’d arrived and when, how they been received and how they got to the neighbourhood, where they were living. So I told him that you arrived in the most neglected neighbourhoods, and he went there to find out about displaced people, to see what it was like. He got so involved that they cut him down too. They put him on trial for some problem, they sent him to prison and when he got out, about a month later – bang! – they killed him! He worked with Andescol in Barranquilla. Professor Alfredo had some university students working with him too to help displaced people, and they were put on trial too and made to leave. As it stands, they’ve fled – they’ve become displaced people themselves.

Because of all that, in 2004 there was a victims’ meeting in Bogotá and my displaced friend said that I should go to the meeting. As I didn’t have any money, the church was going to help me with the cost of the travel. When I went to the Presbyterian church to pick up my tickets, the doorman asked: “What’s your name sir?”

“My name’s Ismael,” I said.

And he said: “Oh, some guys on a motorbike came by.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

And he said: “Yes, go inside and I’ll explain. A man came looking for you and asking after you. He had your ID card number and everything. I said I didn’t know, that there was no Ismael working here, but they said they’d come back because they knew Ismael would come back.”

When he told me that, I grabbed my ticket and left. I came to the meeting in Bogotá and while I was here, they told me that they’d taken this guy, that they’d killed that other guy... so, of course, they were looking for me too and I couldn’t go back. I had to stay in Bogotá.

### *Bad times in Bogotá*

They were after me in Barranquilla, so I

couldn’t go back. I’d come to Bogotá and luckily – these things just happen – I met a friend who was friend of Professor Alfredo. As it turned out that there’d been all that business of the detentions, he advised me not to go back and he offered me somewhere to stay. I stayed in his house for six or seven months, in this cold place, in a city so big, without having any idea where to go. And alone! At least my family weren’t up in the mountains. At least they were in the city, in Barranquilla. Occasionally, when I could get a bit of money together, I’d give them a call, I’d call my partner. It was really tough, her alone there and me alone here, stranded and not doing anything. I spent a year like that, and after a year she sent a message that she couldn’t keep going like that. How can a household live like that? We couldn’t carry on living like that!

So I talked to ACNUR<sup>27</sup>, to the high commissioner, to see if they could help me bring my family here and I got tickets for María to come here with the five children. The other two children stayed there. One of my daughters already has two children. So I brought one here – four of my children and a little grandchild, and we ended up in bad straights, having a really bad time. Honestly, we had no work to rely on, we’ve had to, we have to go to bed on an empty stomach. Sometimes I have to come from where I live in Ciudad Bolívar to the centre to do an errand, and it takes me two hours to walk there and back.

And the situation with my children was pretty much the same, although it was a bit easier here, because we arrived and we were always able to get a bit more because we had better advice and we knew what was what, how to enrol the kids in school. So we enrolled them. and there weren’t so many problems. But there was still discrimination against them in school. To get their students’ card, they were asked whether they were affiliated to the EPS<sup>28</sup> or the ARS<sup>29</sup>, and because we’d never wanted to join a healthcare plan through SISBÉN<sup>30</sup> – that way you lose your right to preferential treatment – they had to show the displacement document, the document

they gave me when I made the declaration, and it shows on their card: “EPS: displaced”. It was an embarrassment for my son, because the other kids asked: “What kind of EPS do you displaced people have?”

And I tell him: “Tell the other kids that it’s also called ARS, and that’s what you’ve got.” Yes, my children often have problems like that.

So that’s one thing. Another is the cold, and another is the cultural change. Back there you get used to being free, but in Bogotá it’s different – you’re a bit more shut in. The habit of shutting doors that they have here, of course, because it’s cold. That also puts people in a bad mood, and the kids don’t like it. And then there’s the music. You barely hear the music from the coast here. It’s all ballads and country and western. And that puts you in a bad mood! Because you’re used to listening to vallenatos<sup>31</sup> and champete, so the atmosphere is different. The other day, the kids said to me: “No, it would be better if we went back, it’s not worth it here, it’s really miserable. We don’t agree with our being here!” And so that becomes a problem, because the truth is, that’s what it’s like.

We’ve adapted a bit to the city of Bogotá, but it hasn’t been easy. It wasn’t easy at all for us, especially at the beginning. Money is everything. If you haven’t got money, you can’t go out, you can’t use the Transmilenio<sup>32</sup>, the buses and all that. And it’s difficult to get work. To be honest, I don’t like construction work, I’ve never liked it. I’m alright at selling, at business, but it’s in the countryside that I feel good. If I’m in the countryside, I spend my time farming, I produce stuff and I enjoy myself. I don’t like it here, it’s really difficult to get work.

I didn’t like studying or anything like that. I like the countryside, the mountains, the wilderness – it gives me life, as we say. I feel like a peasant farmer still, but not any old peasant farmer – a professional one, because I know my profession well, I know how to sow yuca (cassava) to eat.

### *I know I’m only here temporarily*

I know that my name is Ismael, Ismael Maestre, and I’d say I was a person, a human being that came to live in the world and I know without a doubt that I’m only here in passing. I know that I’m here temporarily, and I try to do the best I can, to behave well and to do things well because it seems to me you define yourself by what you are, the things you do.

I thought that life was wonderful, that you could have as much of a family as you wanted, but when all this happened to me and things got tough, I had to resign myself to having the six children. When I was forced, forced to separate from the children...sometimes you leave your children and go and work for a few months and then you come back, no problem, but I had to explain it all to María and sneak away scared, the kids didn’t even know I was going, well...mate! I left, but it made me nostalgic, it made me sad, I had this yearning as I went on my way. At least, thank God, I’ve got a good wife who stood by me and I managed to get ahead.

I don’t think people get displaced out of fear, but out of concern that they might die for something that they didn’t want. You don’t want to die in a war that you don’t support, and if they come looking for you or threatening you, it’s better not to let yourself be killed if you don’t agree with it. I’ve asked lots of friends whether when you’re displaced, you’re cowardly or brave, and some say that we’re cowards because we fled. I say that we’re not cowards, because by fleeing we’re trying to preserve life, not your own life, but your family, your children who don’t know anything about what’s going on or why. You have to look after them. People are displaced simply so they can protect their families. And if it’s a question of protecting your family, it doesn’t matter losing everything that you’ve worked for in life.

Lots of displaced people, many of them, many people in this life have been massacred or assassinated. I think they were killed for being obstinate, for wanting to keep hold of things they’d worked for in life. “Oh, but I’ve got my little house

31 A type of accordion-based music that originated in the city of Valledupar. 32 A mass transit system of buses running on dedicated routes.

and it pains me to leave it!” An armed group comes along, two or three people, and they say: “Leave, because we’re going to kill you. We’ve got information about you.” And they give you the opportunity to leave, to be displaced, but you say: “No, I’ll get myself killed here. I’d rather not leave!” So they come another day and they kill you. Many times they threaten you but you don’t take it seriously, and then another day they come and kill you.

#### *A policy constructed by the state*

We say that displacement is a policy constructed by the state. That’s what they say, and I think that’s how it is, just how they say. You realise that displacement happens where there are riches, like gold; where there are coal mines; where there is good, fertile land where they plan to create palm plantations; where there’s a landowner or an influential person who’s got a certain amount of land that no ordinary person – that no small or poor salaried worker – dare approach, because if anyone complains, they end up displaced too. They contract what today are called paramilitaries, organised self-defence groups, to kill one or two people so that the rest get scared. That’s what happens. Look at the banana workers, for example, both in Urabá and in Magdalena – they’re just poor banana workers, but who owns the plantations? The people controlling the production are influential people, people with money, industrialists, and if anyone complains, they are displaced.

I believe displacement is a structured policy, because the government is involved one way or another, because it tolerates it happening. There are ways of stopping it - having the freedom to complain. A worker or peasant farmer has a grievance, and their grievance should be resolved in a just way. There’s no reason to turn it into a problem! But if they don’t want to resolve things except with bullets, there will be more displacement every day and it will never end.

#### *It’s impossible to repair your dignity*

If someone’s been displaced by violence, displaced by the conflict, I reckon they’re a humble person. In the sense that that they aren’t aggressive or violent, I describe them as people of peace, a gentle person who rejects violence, who doesn’t want to be part of the war, who flees from the war. That for me is a displaced person.

A displaced person doesn’t stop being one until they resolve their socioeconomic problems. I agree that everyone should have socioeconomic stability, whether it comes from the government or not, or they achieve it themselves. Displacement becomes part of their story, what they’ve been through, and it becomes part of their children’s story too, that they fled here and there, that they were displaced, that they had to suffer the hardships of war. For me it’s by becoming established that you stop being displaced.

But there’s a problem: if you end up settling in a place that you really feel is home. In my case, for example, I’ve been forced to settle here, I could die here, but then perhaps I wouldn’t die satisfied, I wouldn’t die as I would have liked, as it would be if I died back there in Palenque: “The lad’s died, let’s organise his ‘kiyauya’<sup>33</sup> and we’ll perform all the right ceremonies as they do round here.” But if you die here in this city? You’d die resentful, you’d die a displaced person. That’s a problem, it’s a problem. But you should leave that aside, and as you become settled, your situation should stop being that of a displaced person.

You’d be happy if you could die on your land, go back to your land and be there. That would be the best thing, the most important thing – but you can’t! It would be awful to die here.

I know that being displaced means you’ve had to leave, that you’ve lost many things, and that it would be really important for them to help you put everything right and help you get back what you’ve lost.

There’s one thing that’s impossible to repair, and that’s your morale, your dignity - it’s irreparable. Many people have said to me that you don’t lose your dignity, and I say: “It’s true, you’re

still alive!” But, for example, sometimes I wonder how it would be if we were to go back tomorrow: I’ve never killed anyone there, I’ve never robbed, I’ve never done anyone any harm. But I was displaced, and there are families there who stayed, and sometimes I think that when those people see me and remember me, they’ll say that for some reason or another I left. And that’s it. Well, that one phrase: “He left for one reason or another” is in itself a loss of morale. Because who is going to erase the fact of having been displaced. Who? No one. You have to face it on your own.

### *How can things be put right?*

There are other serious harms, and one of them is the harm done to people whose family members have been killed. This causes terrible harm, lives are lost amid the displacement, and no one can pay you back for that! That doesn’t have a price.

I’m one of those who believe that you can’t put a price on life, and as life doesn’t have a price, what if the government does offer twelve million pesos to a relative? The person who died is dead. Perhaps he would have earned more than twelve million in his life, much more, or maybe less, but at least he would have lived his life. But they took it away. How does that affect those left behind? Look at my case, for example – they killed my brother, my oldest brother. We were fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls, and then they killed my oldest brother. But I didn’t think about revenge, I never thought about it. But it hurts in my soul. It hurts, because when I was a lad, I thought you were born and you lived your whole life and then you died of old age. I thought some of us would die first, and others later, that the oldest would die first, then the next one and the next one. I thought we’d die in the order that we born! But it didn’t turn out like that. They took away our oldest brother, and left all those kids like orphans. That was really tough for me, and it can’t be put right, even though I’ve got 20 nieces and nephews that are his children!

It’s very unjust. Where’s the compensation, the justice? You ask yourself: “Who’s going to put this right? How are you going to put it right? If the truth is told, if there’s justice and compensation, I think you can manage to forgive. But who are you going to forgive? Who? No, I don’t think forgiveness exists here. There’s just an acceptance, a passiveness on behalf of the person who’s been harmed.

You look at the situation, and if it’s not a policy constructed by the government, then what can it be? Where are the victims? The government hasn’t acknowledged displacement, it still hasn’t recognised it, despite the fact that we had to acknowledge the war for 10 years already. For the perpetrators, there are programmes, preferences, all kinds of things. That’s why it must be a government policy. We can struggle to put things right, we can struggle for reparation and for the truth, but I don’t think it will come to anything in this life, it won’t come to anything. You have get people to consent, to live together harmoniously, but how can you do that with the victimizers all over the place, when you’re rubbing shoulders with them, bumping into them?

I experienced something in 1977, when Alfonso López was president [1974-1978], at the time of the marijuana boom in La Guajira. All the money caused problems – people killing each other because they felt like it, because of money, of rum, of vanity, anything! So they established a law – anyone who killed would be killed. That didn’t seem like a solution, because if someone kills and then you kill them, and someone kills you because you’ve killed that one, well there won’t be anyone left! And yet these days in La Guajira, people don’t kill each other anymore. The people know now that they can’t go round killing each other. If someone does something wrong and they killed him, well to put it bluntly, he was asking for it and he paid the price. But one should try to stop that, calm people down, sort things out with the other family so that kind of thing doesn’t happen, and so that the person in question acknowledges that they’ve done wrong too.

Because if we just kill him, we'll all end up killing each other and there'll be no one left...that's doesn't mean that you're cowardly or fainthearted, it's just that you have to be reasonable in life. It doesn't mean getting down on your knees and begging for forgiveness. I don't think there will be reparation for me, I don't see it. Where's it going to come from? I don't like money!

There's another thing that needs analysing carefully. I could say to one of my relatives: "If I ever find out who killed my brother, I'll want to kill them for sure." Any displaced person could do that. If someone kills a boy's father today, then tomorrow, when he grows up, they tell him: "Hey, it was this guy who killed your father," and then supposedly he knows that guy is a neighbour, well he's going to want to kill him. He'll want to kill him. He'd say: "He killed my father so I'll kill him and I don't care if they kill me! I'll be satisfied because I've killed him." That's a big problem in this country, and what happens in our country is a structural problem, because that's how the top man thinks. The president says: "They did this to me, so I must do it to them." He hasn't learned to forgive, and that's the problem, it's a big mistake in our country. While there are people like him around plotting revenge, there will always be war in our country, because it's part of our culture.

### *Big lessons in the city*

I can honestly say that for me, displacement has affected me, it's done all kinds of things to me, but I deal with it thinking that you have to live your life, wherever you find yourself. There was a workshop once when I was in Palenque, I can't remember what it was about, but the teacher asked me how I situated myself in space and time. Well, I looked around and saw that the floor was tiled. I looked at the tiles and then I stood on one and said: "This is how I situate myself," and I stepped onto another tile. "I can also situate myself here, by taking a step to the side, a step forwards or a step backwards. That's how I situate myself in space and time. I believe that wherever

you are, you have a purpose, you are creative and active and you are a source of firmness.

I was a peasant farmers' leader, and as their leader I defended their cause. I don't think that displaced people's organisations should exist, because I'm a peasant farmers' leader and I belong to one of their associations, a union, and left to our own devices we would have created all the other peasant farmers' associations and their leaders. But what has happened is a removal of the peasant farmers from the countryside to the city, or rather they've been forced out of the countryside so they could be put in the cities. So being peasant farmers in the city, we should be part of a peasant farmers' association where we are. But as the associations were broken up and their leaders massacred, they don't exist anymore and there are displaced people's associations instead. These days we're part of displaced people's organisations, so from now on we have to set up a process, a process for displaced people.

I feel really good doing that, because social work is what I like doing. Despite the fact that I'm not in the countryside anymore, I still do it in the city. I carry on working as a leader and I've found many people, professionals – especially here in the city – with the same ideas and proposals. To come from Cativa is one thing, but to come from there to this place in Bogotá and keep things going as I have done – that feels to me like a triumph.

I've learned to live here in the city and I've come to realise that you need both city and countryside. It's the same country. I've learned about important things in the city. You see the buildings, get on a plane, travel by car and even learn to drive – those kind of things appeal to me here, because they are also good things in life. To learn to live in the city when you come from the countryside – and the freedom in which you live there – that also feels like a triumph for me, a major triumph.

"What would I like?" I know I'm already really old, but if I'd come here younger I would have enjoyed the city more, I would have been



a professional. I'd like my children to study and become professionals in the city. If I had studied, I would have liked to have studied about the world, to have researched things about the world. I would have liked to have studied philosophy.

I'll keep going, as long as I live, I keep up the struggle, working for people, for poor people, and everyone else. I'd like to take my studies further, because I've barely studied at all. Rather I've learned from other people, from life and I don't forget the principles I was brought up with in the hills, in the wilderness. I've not lost those principles. I've learned a lot, and I've come to realise that everything, everything the city has, the countryside has too.

Life there is the same as it is here. It's the same. Perhaps there's more teaching, more wisdom in the countryside than in the city. Think about it: Does an engineer make a plan for a piece of architecture just from his imagination? No, I don't believe that. I think he comes up with it because he's seen it, in something he's been shown, in some image. Look at these doors. What are they made of? Of wood. And where does the wood come from? From the forest. From the wood you can make a painting of an ocean, a river, a building or whatever. The same with the walls. They're made of sand and that comes from the countryside. The houses are made on the land, the same countryside. So everything, everything is from the land. Everything comes from the land. If you go there, you'll become wiser, because you've got everything there, all the images and the colours of life. The wilderness contains all the colours. You can see green leaves, blue leaves, brown leaves, red leaves. You can see every colour in the leaves of the trees, in the rocks, in the water. Everything comes from there. So why study? A peasant farmer, an Indian, knows more than the people in the city.

### *I always try to keep busy*

On Sundays and public holidays in Bogotá, I see the "ciclovía"<sup>34</sup> and I say to myself: "I'm going to go to the 'ciclovía.'" I've been down a couple of times and from where I live, I've walked to the Santa Librada neighbourhood, but I didn't think it was anything special. I prefer the El Tunal neighbourhood. Every now and again, I put a bit of time aside, a little bit of time, and I say to the kids: "Let's go! Let's go and have a walk round El Tunal!" So we go out walking round the neighbourhood, getting to know places. Or I stay at home and study, I look at books, I read, I mess around with kids and sometimes I tell them a joke or a story. That way we have a laugh together and pass the day like that.

Although I haven't got a permanent job, I dedicate most days of the week to the organisation. Every day I try to run a few errands, do a few things for Andescol. But when I haven't got anything to do, I start thinking: "What am I going to live off? How am I going to get the money to pay the rent, to set up a business." I make plans. That's normally on Sundays, and on Sundays I see everyone going out for a walk so I go out for a walk too. I walk for a while and then I spend some time indoors, sitting there reading or doing something else.

I go out on those days, but generally I always try to keep busy. I don't have a day in the week that's specially for me. Every now and again I do a bit of work for Andescol, I go to a meeting or I call a meeting. I go to the library – I like going on the internet to read my emails. My sight's not that good, but I do it anyway. That's a normal day for me, but I don't have a day especially for me. In a normal day, I also spend some time with my children, with my family. I enjoy being with my family, with my wife. I like being together with my black lady though it's teasing her, flirting with her. I don't like being far from her. I like having her near. That's how it is!

34 Every Sunday certain major roads in the capital are closed to traffic so that cyclists, joggers, walkers etc can use them for recreation.

# GUAVIARE









## Raúl\*

### AGE

52 years old.

### BACKGROUND

Teacher and union leader.

### DETAILS

Also a leader of the leftist party Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union). Suffered two forced displacements.

### *The violence itself expropriated their lands*

We are originally from the city of Medellín, in the department of Antioquia. I am the product of parents that lived there in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. My father was displaced from the countryside, as part of an economic displacement realized by Colombia's dual party system: the violent expropriation of the peasant farmer's land. I'm talking about La Violencia (The Violence) of 1948. My father arrived in Medellín as a very young man, used to working in the mountains of Antioquia, and exchanged his machete and mattock for overalls. Like many people of that decade, he became a labourer. My mother, was from the department of Caldas. She was from a medium-sized peasant farmer family with farms and cattle that were also lost to the Violence. She had to leave Caldas. Then she got to know my father and married. The products of that love are 10 children: all urban, educated folk of paisa<sup>1</sup> lineage.

My father had the personality of a paisa, with the boldness to create both a country and riches. But as a labourer, he couldn't do it. He hadn't studied beyond the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and my mother hadn't studied beyond the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. They devoted themselves instead to raising their children. They supported us through high school, despite their difficulties.

My father built a nice and comfortable house. He worked two shifts in a company to be able to sustain the family. It was difficult, because with two eight-hour shifts a day, his health deteriorated, and he slept little. When he wasn't working his regular shifts, he worked extra hours and night shifts on Saturday and Sunday.

### *Always reading*

Logically, with that background, I had the restless spirit of a paisa. I always read; I read the classics. My education led me to theatre. With the help of doña Gabriela, my first teacher, who taught school in our neighbourhood – we still have my parents three-story house – I learned to read and write. I also wrote a few lines of poetry. Doña Gabriela made me read it and applauded me. I think that was key to my literary and academic formation: I came to adore education and the arts, and to realize that through literature, you could grow and understand life. The teacher was a versatile actress, who gave me tools for the future and, during my first years of grade school, made me always go to what we call cultural “performances.” I was very active in all that, and I identified with theatre because of it.

It continued during my public education. The policy there was to have students read

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 Cultural group related to the inhabitants of Antioquia, Caldas, Quindío, Risaralda, the north of the Valle del Cauca and the northwest of Tolima.

works selected by the literature professors. But I wouldn't settle for that. The Chinese Revolution was in its fury. I got to know the five thesis of Mao. I read the classics, I read Marx and the pre-Socratic writers. My older brother was by my side. He was an activist in a leftist movement, in Moir<sup>2</sup>, and a leader at the departmental level. He was imprisoned. They disappeared him for a while and then we got him back. Apart from literature, that has influenced me a lot.

*I acquired a view of the social struggle*

At that time, the knowledge that I had was from primary school and a few years of secondary school. I was also close to one of my teachers. Then, the Secretaría de Educación (Secretari-

at of Education) decided to change that teacher, and I became a class leader, determined to stop that from happening. I contacted people at the Universidad de Antioquia (Antioquia University)<sup>3</sup>, and got some training on the student councils which, at the time, were illegal. We had illicit, clandestine meetings with Universidad de Antioquia students counselling us. Then when I was in my second year of bachillerato (high school)<sup>4</sup>, I convinced the students in the fifth and sixth years to form our own student council. We formulated proposals for educational improvement. It was not just the defence of a teacher's work anymore, but more profound things, acquired in the training and readings at the university and our contacts with the leaders there. It opened our eyes, giving us perspective on social struggle.

Around that time a student strike erupted, marking the first struggle within the institution. I was able to avoid arrest, being still a minor. And the struggle was won: significantly the teacher, who had been our symbol, was not transferred. But we also won institutional reforms and some financial resources.

The experience opened a different panorama and generated respect for us among the teachers, though we were just children. But, no, not respect really, because after the year was over, I wasn't allowed to study any more in Antioquia's public school system and had to finish my studies at private schools.

I still got an education, and I continued the struggle for education through political movements.



But hand in hand with that was always art and, with art, literary encounters.

We had a group for literary training. We put on plays. I remember that we put on a play in the neighbourhood about one of the first massacres on the Urabá banana plantations. We performed on the street, just outside the church, in an area that made for a large stage. That was my first play, and it attracted police surveillance. I looked for other, more established groups and began to train in theatre. I also began studying at the Universidad de Antioquia. I never passed the entrance exams; I couldn't pass them, though I tried three or four times. But I still went to anthropology, sociology and philosophy classes there, and most especially, made contact with all the political sectors and their people there. That's how I got to know all the factions.

Remember that we are talking about the seventies, when the left in Colombia was booming and young people were enormously passionate. Of armed groups, the *elenos*<sup>5</sup> were already in Medellín. I was in immediate contact with them at the university, and set out on a path that eventually would lead to my exile from the city. But not as a guerrilla, because I've never been a guerrilla. I've been a civilian leader, a leader of ideas, a union leader.

### *They give me entrance to the other Colombia*

I had the misfortune of being stigmatized and incriminated to where I had to abandon the city. When I was 19 or 20 years old, a frightening thing happened to me. It was related to the unfortunate persecution and imprisonment of a sociologist staying at my house. They found some flyers on her at a march. They confiscated the flyers and then came for her...Our house was raided and the telephone tapped. My family was persecuted. I went to the Llanos Orientales (the eastern plains) and disappeared from the map.

First I went to the Valle del Cauca. I got to know Buenaventura, gave readings on the life

of Afro-descendants of the Pacific and lived with the people there. I always had a suitcase full of clothes and a backpack full of books, and I gave away a book to anyone I liked. Or I was given books. I got to know lots of people. I went to Bogotá, hitchhiking for most of the trip, getting rides from trucks and buses. When I got there, I threw a coin to decide whether I would go to Caquetá or Meta... and, of course, I ended up going to Meta.

Then after an immense journey, I went to Guaviare. There I was received by the FARC. The state security forces were not around there at that time, and the FARC were out in the open. I was a long-haired stranger with two backpacks, one full of books and the other with clothes. I began to know this other movement, the FARC. They wanted to test me before allowing me into their zone. That was a while ago, in 1983.

I had to work: I had to pick up a hatchet, a machete, a wheelbarrow, gravel; I had to help build towns. And in the process, I got to know that other half of Colombia.

In the decade of the 1980s, the FARC permitted peasant farmers to grow coca. As far as they were concerned, they weren't sponsoring the growing of coca leaf; they were merely tolerating it. If they hadn't tolerated it, the community would have expelled them. I went to the port. I wanted to know things, search out Indians, live with them, and learn from them. I had other dreams, other ways of seeing.

The insurgency wanted to test me, because the people who usually arrived were obvious peasant farmers and peasant colonizers: people displaced by the poverty and lack of job opportunities in the country. And this guy who has books and his own discourse, and comes from, well, some sector of the left...? He assimilated. I gave classes on Marxism to recently arrived peasant farmers, and it felt like another Colombia. "This man, what is he, does he work for the intelligence services? What does he want?" "I showed them my identification card: "I'm from Antioquia and I'm a student at Antioquia University and I was made to leave because..." It was if to say: "I

2 Movimiento Obrero Independiente y Revolucionario (Revolutionary Independent Worker's Movement), of Maoist orientation, founded in 1971. 3 Public, departmental university. 4 Equivalent to the seventh grade of basic education. 5 Members of the Eln, the National Liberation Army.

bear myself naked before you; look I'm no one." As part of their strategy of war, the FARC had to be sure. So I worked for nearly a month there, working and earning money, but not for them. A town was being built, and the owners of the cafes and pool halls paid me. I worked at night hauling gravel to build a house or wielded a machete to clear the lot... and with time, they granted me entrance. I got to know more of Guaviare: its lands, rivers, the people and the problems there. I got involved with everything taking shape: the social and economic development of the region. I ended up being a leader, not of a hamlet, but of a large area. Then they told me I should teach school. The teacher, appointed to run the local school, had become a coca farmer, earning more money with that than with teaching. I saw the importance of education there, and the parents paid me a small sum. But I also began a literacy campaign with the adults. The whole time I was busy, teaching children, teaching adults, and creating literary and theatre groups to interpret the development of the area through art.

#### *I become a recognized leader*

When I least expected it and after much time, the Secretaría de Educación (Secretariat of Education) officially appointed me as a teacher. I got to know the region and travelled a lot. I got to know lots of leaders: people from Caquetá, Tolima, the Andean region, Boyaca, the plains and all the other regions of the country. I got to know Indians and was with a beautiful Indian group, the Guayaberos. I shared with them and learned from them. My priority wasn't coca: I only got to know it by accident and wasn't a grower. I've never been interested in it. I was involved in a different struggle, the struggle to defend the regional economy and other issues. I became a well known leader, first at the regional and departmental level and then at the national level.

Working in education, I became a leader of the teacher's union. We got them to appoint teachers by contract and involve all teachers in

the department in that scheme. I didn't have the blessing of the union, but they had to accept me because the teachers that got appointments named me as their leader. At the same time, I was involved in the process of artistic training, which opened a new vista for me as a head of cultural affairs.

I ended up having a role as a spokesman for the union, for peasant farmers and in cultural matters. As a well-known regional leader, I had to travel. I moved beyond my zone to other areas throughout the department, evaluating situations and fighting with everyone. These weren't the fights of the hamlet, but regional struggles. From being involved at the level of one junta de acción comunal (Community Action Committee), I came to meet with 20 juntas comunales in 20 hamlets and created problems for the department (the departmental government). It was the same for teacher affairs as for cultural ones, and it took me to the administrative centre of the department – San José de Guaviare – as cultural adviser and union leader.

#### *As members of the UP, we had to retreat*

I had to leave because of persecution by the paramilitaries. I retreated to another municipality in the interior of the department. Even there I was threatened. I became a leader of the Union Patriótica [UP] (Patriotic Union) – the only party in the world that has been exterminated in a genocide recognized everywhere. I took on that role because the UP emerged from the dialogues of La Uribe<sup>6</sup> just as I was establishing my connections and then travelling to the different municipalities. I became a deputy (departmental assembly member). I was included in the electoral lists [the electoral lists of the UP]. It was not what I wanted: I had my work in education, art and union activities. Still, as a deputy, I represented the UP, and became a departmental and national leader, someone who was well-known. I arrived in the municipality (San José de Guaviare) from where all the leaders had to flee as a result of a plan to

<sup>6</sup> It was those dialogues that led to the signature in 1984 of the Accords of La Uribe, between the Betancur government [1982-1986] and the Farc, which included a commitment to a cease fire and to generating the necessary conditions so that members of the insurgent group could "organize politically, economically and socially, according to their free determination."



exterminate the UP. Many of the party's leaders there in San José de Guaviare were killed: Octavio Vargas, representative of the Cámara (the national Chamber of Deputies); the president of the departmental assembly and many other leaders... We had to retreat.

We set up in southern Guaviare, in Calamar and Miraflores. There we developed a macro-cultural and environmental program – which won the national prize for environmental achievement – within the first city government where the mayor was elected by popular vote. In the next competition, I again won the award for environmental achievement, this time for a regional environmental proposal, and was invited to the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (National Council of Culture) to give a presentation. We always approached the issue of peace with an emphasis on dialogue, rather than confrontation: we weren't involved in the war, but in political dialogue. But we had to take care that as a result of our work at the national level they didn't send hit men to kill us. And we managed to survive.

The paramilitaries began to conduct raids into the department with the massacre of Mapiripán<sup>7</sup>. We denounced their incursion on the first day, but no one paid any attention. (A sentence has already been handed down by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights<sup>8</sup> against the responsible parties: the Joaquín París Battalion of the Seventh Brigade and other members of the military, as well as members of the departmental government and the municipal government for omission.)

#### *Between prison and displacement*

The para-state strategy continued, emanating from the central government. As we are the last bastion of the Unión Patriótica in the south – and perhaps in the country – they launched an operation against us from Bogotá on November 21, 2002. Mayor, ex-mayors, municipal councilmen, ex-municipal councilmen, deputies, union members, teachers and artists were ar-

rested...and taken to prison. They displayed us on television as ideologues. It was the third biggest arrest in the country and, clearly political, as it was directed against a political party and a form of social expression. They took us to la Picota,<sup>9</sup> and we spent a year as prisoners. Then we were let out because of the statute of limitations had run out. But we couldn't return to the region. Paramilitarism was present, and it was imposing not only its choice of mayors and councilmen but terror as well.

We brought together our people in Bogotá, where we found ourselves displaced. Around the time we were released from jail, many displaced families and leaders also arrived to Bogotá and we brought them together in the Association. Now, as a result of our arrest, there is a plot to frame us. We were acquitted because it was demonstrated at the trial that the VII Brigada Móvil (Seventh Mobile Brigade) framed us. But now it seems we are targets of the soldiers and paramilitaries overrunning the zone.

There have been two humanitarian missions to verify the situation of human rights there. There is an incredible statistic: it is the municipality with the most disappeared people *per capita* in the country. Disappearances, massacres: whatever you want, you find it in the region of Guaviare, specifically the south, between departments – and in the other municipalities of el Retorno, Calamar and Miraflores. We believe as an Association, that there should be a return under dignified conditions, but not the 'dignified' conditions proposed by the state which consists of a return once the troops are there.

Most especially, we comply with the recommendations of the grand assembly [of the Association]. The statutes of the assembly's constitution defend very specific things. Our primary political, social and economic struggle is for a dignified return – a dignified return in the interests of recuperating our social structure. Not the social fabric: we don't like that expression. We have historically constituted a structure in Guaviare and, as the Unión Patriótica, we were the

7 On July 14, 1977, paramilitaries of the AUC assassinated at least 49 people, accusing them of collaborating with the guerrillas. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned the Colombian State for the massacre. 8 Case of the "Massacre of Mapiripán" vs. Colombia. Sentence of September 15, 2005. In: [http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec\\_134\\_esp.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_134_esp.pdf); consulta, February 20 of 2007. 9 National penitentiary in Bogotá.

first political force in the department. Secondly, we defend the thesis that the social structure was violently shattered: chopped to pieces through military raids by paramilitarism and the Colombian state. Let's remember that this happened in Guaviare, precisely in Calamar, which lies at the heart of *Plan Patriota* (the Patriotic Plan).

#### *We were the stone in the militaristic shoe*

From there, the full weight of *Plan Patriota* moved into southern Colombia. They had to uproot us, in the first place, because we were the pebble in the shoe of the militarist strategy, both of the state and of the multinationals, as led by the United States. Then they had to chop apart the entire social structure: *juntas comunales* (social action committees), cooperatives unions, as well as agrarian, environmental and other associations: any association demanding the restoration of social rights. Not only the rights of people, but of the regions, and not only of Calamar or of Guaviare, but of the Colombian Amazon: the protection of the lungs of the world.

We were the Achilles heel, because we didn't agree with the strategy of increasing extensive cattle ranching. That is ranching in which to sustain a cow you have to chop down a hectare of natural forest. The land of the Amazon forests is unique. The grass is poor. Because it has very little nitrogen, the soil has few nutrients and is quickly exhausted.

We know that the strategy is, on one hand, to paralyze the Amazon, and, on the other, to put more rubber and African palm cultivation under multinational control. And behind that is the issue of water, which could cause a third world war. Whoever has the water, has the power. That is to say that he who controls the source of fresh water has power – which is the Amazon – and he controls the subsoil has power, because it is land which is immensely rich in minerals, including uranium, which is used for nuclear power.

We know that the big multinational octopuses, with all their interests, are concentrat-

ing on the region on the pretext of pursuing the insurgency. They use *Plan Patriota* to sweep out the people that have built up the region and then they take control of the land, just as they did in the 1940s along the banks of the Magdalena and Cauca rivers. That process is what we refer to as the *Violencia* (the Violence) – which was nothing more than an aggression against the Colombian people by the rich, the big oligarchs.

#### *The economic model of coca*

Let's now consider the region when it got used to living from the economic model of coca, from the growing of coca leaf. Let's remember the stigmatization that took shape around Miraflores, 'the world capital of coca.' Because of that, the southern part of Guaviare was stigmatized and there were even proposals by the state to do away with the municipality – at that time it was a municipality – as it was in a forestry zone and the coca growers were affecting the national environment...But the problem was much deeper! There is no denying why people were there. And, even more troubling, it was part of an economic model that was the product and responsibility of the state. Let's remember that the colonization of this region was sponsored by the state in the 1970s and 1980s. They would take someone from Tolima and dump him in the department of Guaviare with a shovel and a machete and say...“go and colonize.” There weren't roads, there wasn't a clear agrarian policy to promote crops. People had to go, and then coca appeared by accident, and they grew coca.

The average peasant farmer who grew coca never had adequate nutrition or a good education. The progress that was later seen in education, development, communications, road infrastructure, the presence of state institutions like the Procuraduría (Attorney General's Office) and the rest, was achieved through popular marches and demands in what was known in Guaviare in the 1980s as the “the three peasant farmer exoduses<sup>10</sup>” and which marked a mile-

stone. It's been nearly 10 years since the coca growers' marches that unfolded in Calamar and burst upon the nation.

From one moment to the next, the country realizes that not only is there coca in Guaviare, but that there is coca in Putumayo, in the Bota Caucana, in Caquetá, and in Tolima, and that there are poppies in the paramos (high mountain plains): that 'this is chaos.' There is no agrarian policy to help the peasant farmer. On the contrary, the state itself forces the peasant farmer to find another way to make a living. Those that get rich are in the big cities of the nation, like the drug traffickers who hide behind politicians or who are often themselves politicians in disguise. (Afterwards, it's discovered that there is a strategic alliance between politics and the narco-paramilitaries. We have been denouncing it; history will reveal it further.) And the stigmatization of the population, of the region, is under the pretext of fighting the insurgency. They destroy the region and hand it on a plate to the multinationals.

#### *The old strategy of expropriating the earth*

We're not only talking about the mega-projects in rubber and African palm, but also in the expansion of intensive cattle ranching – which if we do our historical analysis – originates in the Andean region, in all the valleys that have been expropriated from peasant farmers in Magdalena Medio, in the Cauca and Magdalena valleys, on the banks of those two rich rivers. Now it extends to other plains and to the Colombian Amazon.

In the 1970s and 1980s, they also expropriated land in Caquetá from the peasant farmers, from those who had tamed the jungles and the savannahs and planted better grasses to fix nitrogen in the soil. Land was also expropriated on the banks of the Ariari... and now it's happening in Guaviare and in Putumayo. It's the old strategy in the fight for land.

Colombia has a history of displacement involving the blood of its people. It's just

that we're surrounded by so much land, so much wealth, so many levels of topography, that it's like we didn't see it. The strategy of 1948 was to depopulate and dispossess the peasant farmers who had the best lands on the banks of the rivers and send them to the slopes of the mountains or to the agricultural frontier, like the Amazon and Orinoco.

What's happening today is that the survivors of that process – who are the displaced; we, the displaced – get the picture and have demands. We don't see a future, at least in this Administration. The problems of a displaced person can't be resolved with a lunch, provisions and a housing plan that gives him 9 million pesos. And that amount only if he ends up registered as a displaced – because there are many people who don't go to the registry out of fear for their lives – Where is the social justice? Where is the social system of rights? Where is the state that is benevolent with a population as vulnerable as the displaced? There isn't even a policy for the people of Colombia, now that nearly 60% of the population lives in poverty and 30% in extreme poverty.

We're calling on people to organize and mobilize; if this Congress of the Republic is going to begin to legislate, we have to fill the plaza de Bolívar, create a permanent Congress. Then the world will understand that there isn't terrorism, but rather a social problem, a conflict that is driving people from the countryside with horrific violence, leaving the dead behind and forgotten in the unmarked graves just being discovered today.

Here is señor Mancuso<sup>11</sup> and señor whoever, but who is behind them? Who are the real intellectuals who have plotted this strategy, not plotted it now, but since the Republican era? Where are the responsible ones? Because the Colombian people can't continue bleeding under the pretext that there are guerrilla groups at war with the Colombian state. No, señor!: What you have is a people who have historically been massacred to steal their land on the one hand, and to steal their right to life on the other. That's the only thing that has to be clearly understood

11 Salvatore Mancuso, paramilitary commander.

in this country: that there are certain things that have caused the war in Colombia as well as social injustice and the concentration of the economy in the hands of a few families.

If it's true that people have been displaced by paramilitarism, it's also true that people have been displaced by the guerrillas. It's undeniable, and we can't just sweep it under the carpet. One thing is displacement by the paramilitaries and another is displacement by the guerrillas or the army. There are people who have watched their families being murdered in front of them. I'm not generalizing about the Colombian army, because the army is a sacred institution that has good people, but there are also people that play along with paramilitarism – as is being shown in the courts – and, at the same, act in the name of the army.

You see family X that arrived yesterday from Guaviare after being displaced by the army and you tell them where to go – to a personería (municipal people's advocate), to a defensoría (Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman) – and there they wink at them. It gets handled in a certain way so that nothing happens. Okay! They were displaced by the paramilitaries; okay! they were displaced by the guerrillas. But displaced by the army itself? The person at those offices knows that saying that would have international implications: that it would have international implications to say that the state itself is displacing people.

Before the 1940s, the Colombian population was 70% rural and 30% urban. After 50 years of permanent war for the land, not even 30% of the population is rural. That is to say that things have been reversed because the large population of peasant farmers have been displaced and are being displaced again. Where are they going to, if the agricultural frontier was the Amazon, the Pacific, the national parks? Where are they going to go? Of course, all of them end up in the cities or in the small towns, sinking into a state of extreme poverty and misery. That's the spark of the social and armed conflict in Colombia. Because we have to acknowledge that the

conflict is not what the current president of the Republic says it is when he says that we have here (a problem of) terrorism.

Today, after hundreds of years of Republican life, we haven't even resolved the problem of food and housing. Let's remember what Petro<sup>12</sup> said: "four million hectares of land have been expropriated by the paramilitaries from the peasant farmers." What action is the Executive taking with respect to that? What bills have been presented or are up the government's sleeve for presentation to Congress as new legislation bearing on the problem of land tenancy? How will demobilized, reinserted and displaced people divide up that cake? What's happening is that they are all thrown together. In other words, the victimizers will be set against the victims, and the land will be for everyone. Is that the strategy of agrarian reform the victims are demanding?

#### *Return home to recover the social fabric*

We believe that this social fabric that the government refers to is a social structure, which the guerrillas didn't build, but was built by the civilian population: the guerrillas entered the nation's south much later, after the social structure already existed. That is what we have to recuperate. We, as the Unión Patriótica, also have to recuperate the political space that we created democratically and electorally.

There is a culture among the left in Colombia that has other voices, dreams and longings and other ways of perceiving the country in a democracy and in a social state under the rule of law (estado social de democracia). For us, a return has to be in keeping with those elements, not in keeping with the idea that there are troops that 'are securing'<sup>13</sup> the area so there can be a return. Does that guarantee for us the recuperation of the social structure? Or do we have to avail ourselves of the social structure they implemented in favour of the multinationals?

That is what the assembly has expressed, because our organization is an organi-

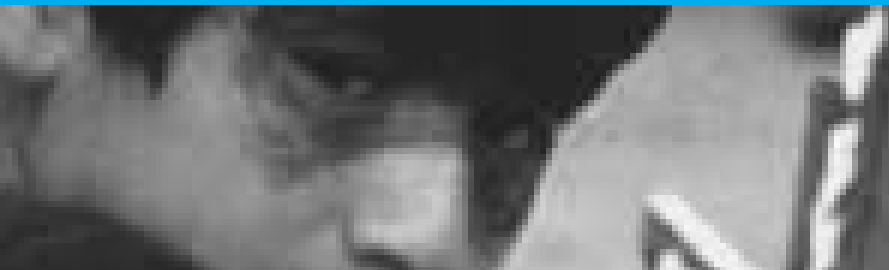
<sup>12</sup> Gustavo Petro, senator [2006-2010] of the Polo Democrático Independiente (Independent Democratic Pole).

<sup>13</sup> For the government, 'asegurar una zona' (secure a zone) is equivalent to recovering control of a zone through the use of the Armed Forces.

zation of politically displaced people, of people from the left, an organization that is in disagreement. So it is unique with respect to other organizations of displaced people in the country.

There are regions with an organized and historic anti-paramilitarism, of people, who despite having suffered the death of their colleagues, are standard bearers and who present themselves and make denunciations. There are

other regions, who have gotten used – in the semidarkness of their loneliness – to a complete lack of organization (structure). That large and disperse population, lacking grassroots leaders, will find it difficult to unite. You see them in the street: Indians, peasant farmers from all parts of the country, on every corner, trying to find a way to survive but not trying to organize themselves. That is the problem we have to confront.



*What you have is a people who have historically been massacred to steal their land on the one hand, and to steal their right to life on the other.*





# Leydi\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
45 years old.	Peasant farmer.	Forcibly displaced from Calamar (Guaviare) to Cúcuta (Norte de Santander). Her husband is disappeared.

I was born in Barbosa (Santander). From Barbosa they brought me here to Cúcuta where I was raised and my family worked. I have eight or nine siblings on my father's side and two from my mother and father: Martha Yolanda and Anayibe.

The family I remember are the old man, a good father; a good mother. My family didn't give me an education because we were always very poor. They never gave me an education, but they did teach me to work. From when I was very little until I met my husband, I would work in households to be able to support my family.

In my family, my mom gave me a thrashing once, and I left home. I went to Cucutilla to pick coffee with some girl friends. I arrived at the house of a lady, my future mother-in-law, and I began to work. She became very fond of me and me of her. Until this guy came along and we lived together for three months as friends. Then we became romantically involved and left to work together. I was around 19. We spent some time in La Gabarra; then we returned. People lived from coca there and I've never liked that coca stuff. We returned to Cucutilla and there my little boy was born. I had my son when I was 22 years old.

A guy that I knew before knowing the father of my little boy cheated on me. He told me that he lived alone, and I believed him. We were

together for six months. Then his wife turned up when I was already six months pregnant; she turned up and I ended up hating him. I hated him because he had mocked me. What I don't want done to me, I don't do to others. And it was because of that that I got the beating, because I got pregnant.

So I left and that's when I went to Cucutilla and got to know my future husband. When I moved in with him, my boy was already 13 months old, a big boy. My future husband accepted me just like that, saying that he would recognize my boy as his son. My future father-in-law told me that I had to accept that my child was now my husband's and give him my husband's last name ...I accepted. I accepted and I went to live with him. We went to La Gabarra and then we went to Guaviare. There we started to work together to get ourselves a house. It was our dream. And to be able to get married, because his family cared for me a lot and they are very Catholic and told me that I had to marry him so we could buy ourselves a house.

So we went to Guaviare to work, and we lasted six months working on a farm. And when he saw that we had saved money, he saw a good deal and bought a farm: they sold it to him for 6 million pesos<sup>1</sup>; we paid 4,800,000 pesos to the seller and my husband said that when

\* Name changed by the interviewee. 1 A dollar is equivalent to \$2,200 and a Euro, to \$3,000.

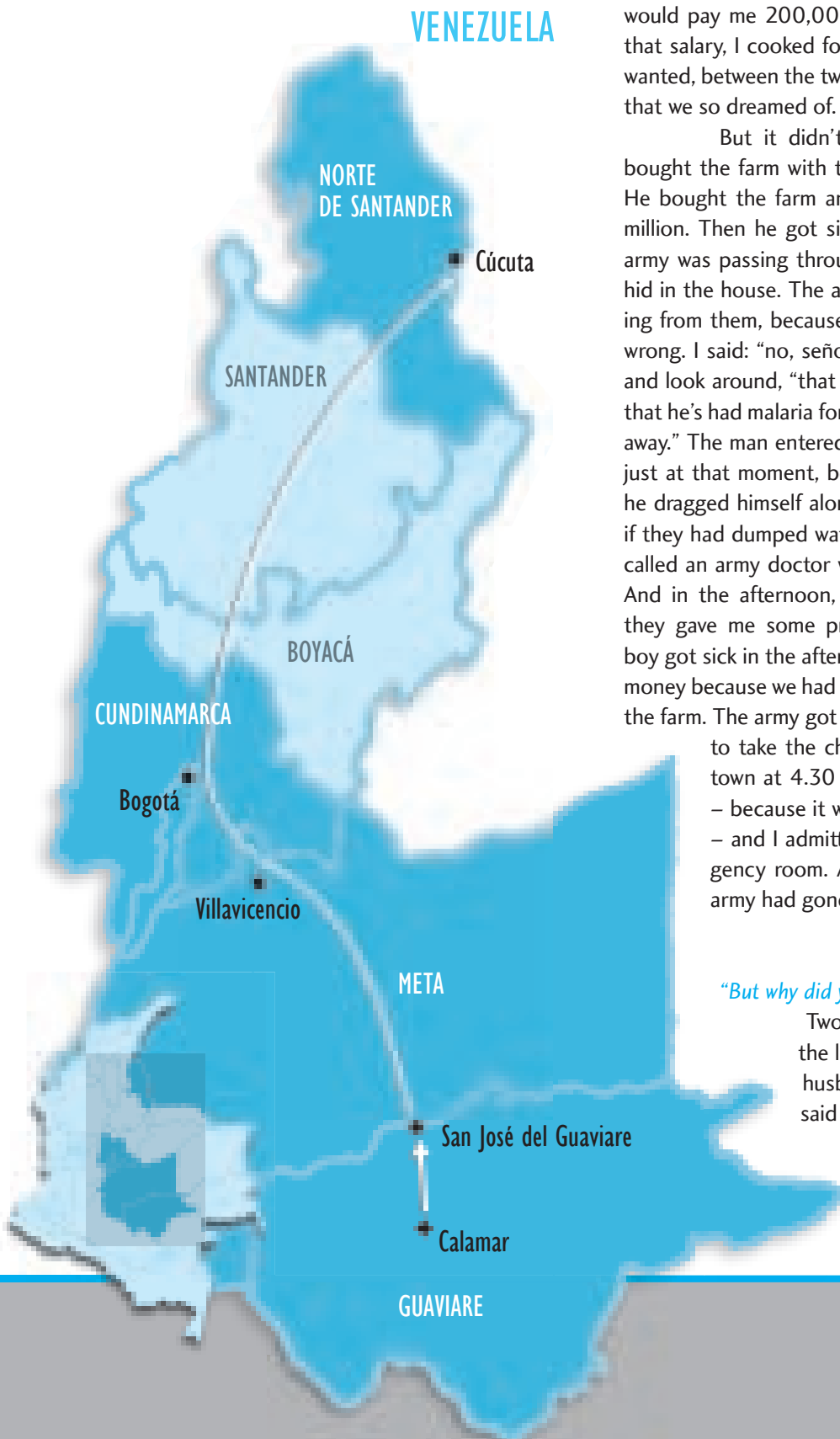
the political campaigns were over, he would pay the rest. It was then that the army appeared. The house was along an old Spanish trail. The army as well as those people from the mountains<sup>2</sup> would pass by.

I began to raise chickens. You could sell a chicken there for 20,000 or 30,000 pesos. I also sold the eggs. He worked: he would go out and collect coca leaves and get contracts to clear the weeds from pastures or grow coca. Sometimes I would get work cooking for lots of laborers: they would pay me 200,000 pesos a month. To get that salary, I cooked for 20 or 30 labourers. We wanted, between the two of us, to buy that house that we so dreamed of.

But it didn't work out that way...He bought the farm with the money that we saved. He bought the farm and we ended up owing 2 million. Then he got sick – he got malaria. The army was passing through around that time. He hid in the house. The army said that he was hiding from them, because he had done something wrong. I said: “no, señor” that he could come in and look around, “that he's sick with malaria and that he's had malaria for four days and it won't go away.” The man entered and my husband fainted just at that moment, because he was very weak; he dragged himself along the floor and it was as if they had dumped water on him. Then the man called an army doctor who gave him a medicine. And in the afternoon, a helicopter arrived and they gave me some provisions. But our young boy got sick in the afternoon. We didn't have any money because we had given it all to the owner of the farm. The army got up a collection to be able to take the child to a doctor; I left for town at 4.30 and arrived at 8 at night – because it was three, four hours away – and I admitted the child to the emergency room. And when I returned, the army had gone.

*“But why did you take him?”*

Two days later, the people of the law<sup>3</sup> arrived and pulled my husband out of the house and said that he was a bastard,





that he had been helping the army. He said that he had never helped the army, that the army had simply been there and that we were just peasant farmers. And he said to them: “you have the weapons; you’re the ones who give the orders. If you are here, you are welcome because we can’t say “go away.” Whether we like it or not, you’re going to stay here. Or no?”

And a woman belonging to the group arrived and pushed him and said: “yea, but if we were them you would accept us!” and I told her: “please, don’t hit him” and she said: you, shut up!” Then I went and made them lemonade, because they had asked for some, and I told them that in truth: “there’s a bit of guarapo and its fresh.” They drank guarapo<sup>4</sup>. They threw away the long-necked bottle, they broke it; they took ten chickens... I didn’t say anything because they had the weapons and I was afraid. And they kept saying things to him; they insulted him terribly.

They took him away to the grapefruit tree. They tied him up and my kids stuck their heads out the door and said: “dad, don’t go!” They pushed him; they didn’t let him speak, and I went out and said: “if you want, kill me, but I won’t let you take him.” They grabbed my by the waist and then the lady hit me with her rifle: I was two months pregnant at the time. It was in November, on November 17<sup>th</sup>. She hit me, and the blow knocked me to the ground and I screamed at them not to take him away, and he said to me: “my love, calm down, because they can kill you...” I felt assaulted by nerves and my kids cried. I didn’t realize that they were crying. On top of that, that they were sick... I didn’t think of that.

They pushed me; they took him away and I began to scream. A lady came back and said: “señora, relax, because soon you’ll have news of your husband,” and I said: “but, why are you taking him away? He hasn’t done anything wrong! You can ask the neighbours, he hasn’t done anything...” I said it was all because the army had passed through and made their camp in the house... “I won’t deny it: they stayed here two days: they arrived, they were here...we can’t tell

them “go away” because then they’ll surely think we are helping you.”

So they took him away. I stayed behind in the house. I woke up sick: one day I stained myself and the next day I didn’t. I knew that I was pregnant, until I gave up and a friend said to me “Leydi, go to the hospital. Leave the boy here and I’ll take care of him.” They examined me at the Calamar hospital. I fainted, I couldn’t take it, because four, five days had already passed. When I woke up, I was in the La Libertad hospital: they admitted me to the hospital because I was bleeding heavily and supposedly they had noticed I was pregnant, but not that I had aborted. I woke up, and I spoke with the doctor and he said to me: “Are you okay?” and I said: “I feel fine; I’m dizzy, that’s all. The doctor said: “We’re going to send you to San José,” and I asked why. Is it because I am bleeding so much?

They gave me an injection and sent me to San José. I spoke with a doctor there and the doctor asked me if I knew that I was pregnant, and I said: “of course, I’m two months pregnant,” and she asked me if I had fallen, received a blow, if maybe I had gotten very angry... And I remembered, but I lied because those people had him and, maybe if they found out that I talked, they would kill him. I told her that I had fallen, and she told me that I had lost the baby, that it had been dead for days. I told her to please save him, that I didn’t want him to die, to try and save him. She said: “nothing can be done because he’s been dead for days; we have to remove the remains. Otherwise there might be an infection.” So I had to resign myself; they gave me a scrape.<sup>5</sup> There was nothing to be done anymore. I went to Calamar, and someone on a motorbike dropped me off close to the house.

Little by little, I approached my house, and the first thing I asked is if anyone had gotten news. That was in November. I spend December there; I spent January there. Nothing. The army kept passing close by, and they would ask me about him. They would say: “how’s it going, dark one? how is you husband?,” “he’s fine” I wanted

2 Refers to the guerrilla, because of its camps in the mountains. 3 The guerrillas. 4 Fermented drink made from sugar-loaf or sugar cane juice. 5 Scraping of the interior mucus of the uterus to remove, in this case, remains of foetal tissue or placenta.

to tell them, but I was thinking of my kids. So I would say: “he’s working.” I try not to speak to those people.

*“Count to five and .. Disappear!”*

They arrived precisely on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> of February. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, a militia member arrived and told me: “lady, you know that you can’t be here,” and I said: “What wrong have I done to you, if we are working here, trying to feed our kids? ” So he said to me: “did you know that your husband is sick?” and I said: “please, tell me how he is, what did you do to him! He is the only one I have, I don’t have any other family here...!” Then he pushed me and told me that he didn’t know anything: “what I do know is that you have to leave here,” “why do I have to leave? I haven’t done anything wrong. Why don’t you investigate first with the neighbours? Investigate, don’t harm the peasant farmer without knowing who we are!” Then the man said: “fine, we’ll see you. Think it over.” And he went.

I didn’t pay him any mind. I went out to the crops and trimmed some plants and worked a quarter hectare and left another for another day. ...The next day I got up at 4 and made breakfast for the boys, so I could go out and work and trim the plantain trees. Just then those people arrived ...a lady hit me and said: “you have to leave here: I will close my eyes and count to five... and you will disappear!” And I got down on my knees in front of the lady. (I pleaded with her) that she not throw me out (and said) that they had already taken him away and that I didn’t have a peso with which to leave... She said leave: “Leave...or do you want to go and accompany your husband? I said: “Please! What did you do to him, did you kill him?” and she said “Go!” She began to load her gun, and I remembered my two kids. I didn’t remember the animals...just my kids. Then I left with the kids for Calamar.

We arrived dirty, barefoot. I asked a woman that I knew there if she wanted to hire me to buy provisions for her and she said: “Leydi,

what happened to you?” I told her. She said: “stay here and work,” and I said: “I can’t stay here.” I was very afraid, “With all my hear I want to stay, but they told me at the farm that I had to go.”

That was on February 17<sup>th</sup>; in November, they took him away; in February of 2006 I left Calamar. On the farm, we hadn’t been doing that fantastically, but we were at peace, we had food, we didn’t have to work as hard as we do here in Cúcuta and all four of us were together. My kids were going to be able to study, and I thought that maybe things would change. But they didn’t. We had to leave. A man told us that he would take us to San José; from San José, they dispatched me in another car to Villavicencio, and the same driver talked to a companion who then took me to Bogotá. In Bogotá, I began to beg for money, because I didn’t have a peso to give to my kids and they were hungry. So we began to beg, and a lady came up to me and asked me why the kids were crying. I told her they were hungry. The lady asked the kids what they wanted to eat and they said they wanted chicken. The lady bought them food in a restaurant of the Terminal<sup>6</sup>, and said: “what’s your name? I told her. Twenty minutes later she arrived with the tickets; she gave them to me and the boys.

*The solution to my problems*

We arrived in Cúcuta and I spent a couple nights sleeping in the Terminal because I didn’t have any money to pay for accommodation: If I paid for accommodation, I wouldn’t have any money to feed the kids...I remembered where my mom had lived, in Caño Limón. I went to Caño Limón, and they told me that the house had been sold...and I asked around and nothing. I told the boys that we were going to the Terminal to see if there was someone we knew there. I was there a couple nights when something told me I had to return to the neighbourhood.

I arrived, I passed some tanks and I ran into a woman. She said: I won’t offer you riches, because I don’t have any” and I said: “no, for the

love of God, Doña Marina, give me a place to stay for these boys, we don't have any place to sleep." I told her what had happened, that we were badly off. "Doña Marina, give me a place to stay, even if it's just for the boys" and she said "if you want a place to stay, you have it, but what I don't have is a bed or food. We're doing terribly!" I told her: "Look, Doña Marina, if you give me a place to stay, I promise you that I will find food," and she said: "fine." I came from the Terminal with a bag and some clothes that they had given the boys, I went to the house, and after that I went out to look for work. I didn't find any work, maybe because I was badly dressed and had recently arrived... I don't know.

So I tried to take my own life. That woman had Baygón.<sup>7</sup> I was preparing the Baygón to give to the boys, because I said to myself: "I don't have money, work...I'm desperate. How am I going to support them?" I was desperate: "I'm going to give this to my sons," I told myself. I had hung a rope. I was thinking: God forgive me! I had reached a dead end and there was no way out. The woman found me and scolded me, saying: "What are you planning on doing?" Did I think I was going to solve my problems that way? You didn't do that. I had to think of my sons... And she began to tell me things. I began to cry, I was desperate and she said: "hand the kids over to Bienestar<sup>8</sup>." I said no because they would take them away from me, that I didn't have anyone's support. She said: "As long as you are thinking of taking your own life, go to Motilones; there's a father there who helps displaced people." That afternoon I talked to a father there and he told me that Father Franchesco wasn't around. Still, he gave me provisions, which I gave to the woman, for all of us.

And that Sunday as I was leaving mass I approached the secretary of the father and she said to me: "girl, what's wrong?" I was on my knees, crying and I told her. She said: "don't worry!." She spoke with the father. I continued praying. Then the father touched me on the back and said: "come, my child, come and we'll talk." I told him what was happening. He said: "Wait four

days and I'll find a solution." I went to the house where the woman lived. She told me: "go to the soup kitchen and to the school and get the kids studying." I went and spoke to the director but she couldn't take them during those days. I went to the soup kitchen and a lady gave me lunch for the boys: I would take them there and she would feed them.

My child got sick. Blood started pouring out of the nose of the older one – the one who hardly talks, the shy one. I took him to Comuneros. But the lady there didn't want to receive me because I didn't have any money with which to pay and I didn't have any (health) cards<sup>9</sup> or anything. So I kneeled down in front of her, that she should please look after him, that the child was bleeding...Finally, she was moved; she looked at him and brought me a prescription. He had received a blow and the blood was pouring out his nose; she told me that maybe it was a vein that had burst. I got the potion; I gave it to him. Then the doorman at the school said: "if you want, let's go and call the father" because I was very nervous. He told the father: "look the lady has come from Guaviare." The father said: "Tomorrow some Italians will take you; I have a hut near Escalabri and, if you want to go, they will come tomorrow and find you." Then, the car broke down and, I don't know what happened, but they didn't go, so...so someone told me: "why don't you go to the Defensoría del Pueblo (Human Rights Ombudsman's Office), to the Red (Social Solidarity Network)?" And the person said: "there they can help you with a month of rent." Doña Marina was very kind to me. But she has a lot of dogs and those dogs urinate on top of the bed. The children would be about to eat something and the dogs would come and eat on top of the children. I was told that maybe it was because of those dog hairs that the child had gotten sick, because he was constantly suffering from fever. I went to the Red and señorita Maité took me to the house of Señora Marina and she took me to Corprodinco<sup>10</sup>. We arrived there at 6 and they helped me.

7 Brand of household insecticide. 8 Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare), entity in charge of the protection of minors. 9 Refers to affiliation in the subsidized health service, through the Sistema de Selección de Beneficiarios para Programas Sociales (Sisbén), in English, the System of Selecting Beneficiaries for Social Programs (Sisbén). 10 Corporation of Professionals for Integral Community Development, an Bucaramanga ngo.

I paid two months of rent; the Red gave me the rent for the other month and the father came to me and said: "don't pay any more rent, let's go to the hut. Though there's a problem with the water there, you won't have the pressure of having to pay rent." I said, yes; so some Italians took me there. When I got there I wanted to, I don't know. The wood of the house was rotten: it was terrible! They had given me some plastic mattresses so that my kids could sleep and then thieves came in and stole the mattresses they had given me. I had to sleep with the boys on the floor for a while. Then the father proposed that I take the kids to the soup kitchen. He said "if you want, bring your kids to study here; bring them to the soup kitchen and that way you will have your food." I don't have anything to do: I don't have work, they give me food, I help them, and when there's left over food, I bring the food back. Sometimes, when I don't have brown sugarloaf or rice they give it to me. And that's how we're getting by.

*For me, he's not dead!*

On May 26<sup>th</sup> I got a call saying that he was dead, that they had found him in the township of La Ceiba where we had lived. I believed the story because they had killed some friends around the same time. A woman named Alda lives in the township; she called because I had asked Mrs. Marina if she could lend me her cellular number so they could call me and I could find out about him. She told me "of course" and I called Guaviare and told her that the person who knew Jairo should please call me, communicate with me. And it was thus that they called me and told me that they had found him dead... but, for me, he's not dead! They told me that they would call me so I would calm down "have strength for your children, don't give up. They found your husband..." I asked how it was that they knew that it was him. She told me that it was because of the Sisbén, the Sisbén card that was besides the tomb, in the pile of earth where he was found dead. I began to cry, to scream. The woman never called me again.

A short while ago, I don't remember the date, a man called me. He said he was calling from Guaviare: "hello, my love, how are you?" I said to him: "who's calling" and he said. "it was such a short while ago and you've already forgotten me?" I said: "if you don't say who you are, I'm not going to answer your questions." He said: "I'm Jairo. How are the kids?." I said to him: "They're fine, but you aren't Jairo, this isn't his voice. He repeated: "yes, it's me, my love." I said: "fine, if you want to see me, okay. I will go to el Guaviare, but at least tell me what the name of your mother is, tell me how many brothers you have?" So he said to me: "it doesn't matter now; I will tell you when we are together... What matters is that you come and we see each other." So it's not him, it's not him, because if it was him, he would have told me: "my sister is named so-and-so, I have so many brothers, my mom is called so-and-so or my father is called so-and-so." But he didn't say that.

It might be the people who have him, or it could be blackmail from someone who doesn't have anything else to do, someone playing with the feelings of others. Maybe it's a trap... But it's not him. Still I know that he's alive, because inside me there's something that tells me he's alive. Maybe I don't want to accept reality, because he wasn't a bad person; yea, we had problems at home, like in every home. He was very responsible, he didn't fight with anyone, he was a hard worker, he helped people, the neighbours... I don't know. Something within me says that he's not dead. I've been dreaming of him for the last three or four nights.

I see him in my dreams. He comes to me, I go to touch him and I get afraid because I say to myself that if I touch him he'll disappear. And in the air he dries my tears and he says to me: don't cry, those tears aren't real, I'm fine." I say that this is a sign, maybe, because I ask my Lord often, that if he is alive he should help me, because I'm doing really badly here. I tell the Lord I don't care if I can't go back but, at least, send me someone who can help me. If he was to return, things would change for me, because he would work and I would work. I don't know. Between

us, we would raise the kids and I would fill this emptiness, these memories...I wouldn't suffer so much from his absence. Those memories kill me, because sometimes when I'm alone, I cry. I make sure the kids don't see me.

The kids...terrible! They ask for their dad and I tell them that he's working. And one of them says: "mom, they took him away!" I tell him: "no, my love, they took him away so he could work. He is fine." I've never told them the truth, because I don't want to harm them. Sometimes, they talk to me and they say: "mom, if dad is not coming back, don't get another dad," and I've promised them that I'll never get them another dad. I ask God to help me move forward, to give me work and health so I can earn money and give them at least some education. That's my plan.

(Our life) has changed a lot. When we were there, they had all the food they needed, clothes, shoes, medicine. We had the card then. Here, by comparison, we work a bit more: the clothes we left behind, everyone has given us clothes, shoes. Here everything's a problem. For example, my child's accident: supposedly there is an insurance for hit-and-run cars, for the car that hit my child and drove off. They say that there's an insurance that covers it. But I didn't understand how it works and they've charged me money.

#### *Let my child be well!*

That was June 18. We were going to the Lomitas church. It was father's day and we went because I'm devoted to the Divine Child and we were going to ask God that my husband return, that no matter where he was, he be returned to me. The bus broke down before we arrived; so I got off and I asked the bus driver if he could do me the favour of returning the bus fare to me... We were far in front of the bus and I was waiting for other cars to pass by when a car approached, driving in the wrong direction. It climbed the sidewalk where I was. It snagged my child and threw him a distance. Out of desperation, I yelled: "it's killed him." I tried to throw myself in front of a car.

I think it was the same one, because it was coming damn fast. My child said to me: "mom for the memory of Dad..." I grabbed my little one, I threw him over my shoulder, I stopped another car and said: "please, take me to the hospital, my child is serious!" The man took me to the hospital, I remember that I had \$5,000 pesos in my pocket. I paid him for the ride. I said to him: "look senior, I don't have any more." I don't know if it was worth that, but I gave it to him.

We arrived. I hadn't looked at my boy's leg. I had seen that it was scraped, but I hadn't seen that it was broken. They admitted him and I told them that there had been an accident, "I have the letter" and they didn't accept it: "wait and we'll see." They took an ultrasound scan and he had broken his leg, he had fractured his leg.

So they took the boy up to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, where they told me that we were in a clinic that cost \$160,000 pesos or \$150,000 pesos a day. Of course, I worried a lot. He had already been there for three days. I went to find out what was happening in the emergency room. They told me that there was insurance available. They asked me how many kids I had, if I had a husband. I told them some of it, but not everything. But yes, I did tell them some of it and they noted down that something...They operated on him on June 10<sup>th</sup>. He spent 22 days in the hospital. They did the operation on the 10<sup>th</sup> and handed him back to me on the 11<sup>th</sup>. I was told it cost \$3,900,000 pesos. I said "I don't have money. What should I do?" And a woman there said to me: "Get me 300,000 pesos, because they'll pay for some of it here. There is an insurance policy that covers some of the cost. Get me \$300,000." I said doctora if I had \$300,000 pesos right now, I'd be rich; I don't even have enough to pay the fare to my hut." So she said: "look, bring me the money within a month." I told her that I would and she said: "I'll do this for you: you just bring me 150,000 pesos." But when the time was up, I still hadn't been able to get the money. I asked the father for help and he said: "lets go and talk this over!" We went to the Red.

There were two different prescriptions. I couldn't pay for either of them. With a lot of effort, I did what I could to get some medicine for the pain. I went to the father and told him to help me, to give me a hand: "help me father, it's for the child's medicines." He said "no, come back tomorrow, we'll go to the Red; they have to give you the medicines." At the Red, they gave me a piece of paper and with that I went to the hospital and the doctor changed the prescription. It wasn't the drug that the doctor who had operated on him had prescribed, but another. I didn't know what to do. The doctor helped me out with some of the medicine. The prescription cost around \$40,000 pesos and included 36 pills. They gave me half for free. I haven't been able to buy any more because I don't have money ...I'm broke! I could only get that amount. The day that I went they didn't have more and I don't have money for fare to go back and get it. Where was I going to leave my kids while I walked from home to the hospital? I can't do it, I haven't been able to go and get the drug. Of course, I didn't make the effort either, because they had told me that they didn't have it, that they had some medicine for infection and pain, but not the medicine that the other doctor had prescribed.

He still can't walk. Wherever I go, I have to carry him: to the bathroom, to the soup kitchen where I am helping out, I have to carry him. Thank God, the child says it doesn't hurt him and I beg God and the Holy Virgin that they help me, that the child recover.

When they handed out the report cards, the teachers told me that the boy was doing badly at school, that he would have to repeat first grade. I said to his teacher: "it doesn't matter, teacher, what matters to me is that the boy recover his health." It makes me really sad seeing my son dragging himself along. I feel bad. I know that God hears me, that he will help me and that my child will have a good leg again. On top of that, I don't know whether this bad back is from carrying the boy around. Sometimes I bend over to lift something up and I feel out of breath

as I straighten up. The day before yesterday, I was taking down a pot of lentils and I dropped it. I couldn't do it. I stood up straight again and stayed like that for a moment until I felt okay again. I haven't been able to go to the doctor either. In the first place, there's the problem of bus fare. Secondly because I can't leave the kids alone and, if I go, I have to carry one of them.

### *God willing, life will get better*

I don't know. I think that God willing, life will get better, because it hasn't been at all easy for me with all these problems: leaving behind everything we had, sacrificing so much to get what we had and then leaving everything behind ...Because sometimes war arises. The war waged by these people is not our fault. We don't know why they shoot each other; we don't know why they drive so many people out of the countryside.

Our life is the countryside. In truth, I haven't been able to get used to life in the city. The countryside is everything to me, because if you plant a plantain tree, you know it will produce. You have yuca, hens that with 15 eggs give you their chickens; corn that if watered will give you a harvest. For me, the city is not like the countryside. But I had to leave everything behind, come here, and move ahead with my sons.

Though I wanted to die, I've had to keep going. This is not at all easy for me. Everything has gotten difficult here; the wind knocked down the wall of my hut. I thank the father who gave me some boards to fix it...But I didn't have any money to pay someone to help with the repairs. So I did what I could and scabbled around until I began to set the poles in the ground and a man – the doorman at the school who helped me talk to the father – and his wife saw what I was doing and helped me finish off the job, helping me get the poles in the ground and the boards in place. So I secured the house a bit.

Then a lady from San Vicente de Paul<sup>11</sup> gave me this mattress – that I have been taking

close care of because I don't want them to rob that too.

Around here, when it's not the neighbors, it's the thieves who enter the house. It's said there are thieves from Camilo Daza<sup>12</sup> who come around to steal. Two months ago, they came around here and kept people up all night. The police arrived and shot at them from down here below – where its pure mountain and scrubland. They shot back.. I don't know. I have a lot of faith in the Divine Child, "Holy Virgin, protect me, and if it's true that my old man is with you, I say to him: "Jairo, help me, give me strength."

I've gotten help only from the Red Cross, which gave me money for three months, and Corprodinco, which gave me provisions after my son's accident. But the provisions were robbed when the child had his accident, when I was away for 22 days. They robbed the things I had. But, thanks to God, the majority of people around here are displaced. It's possible that the people who steal also have hungry children. Because its really sad to see a mother who doesn't have a penny and children who are hungry, it's very sad. You can't imagine the desperation that can grip a mother without money, without provisions for her children. And a disease...that's really terrible!

Sometimes, I get jobs washing clothes for 5,000, 8,000 pesos. I take the child, the sick one with me when I don't go to the soup kitchen to make food for the boys, asking God that the boy recover and be able to work, because this is really terrible. It isn't easy at all. I would be a liar if I said that I didn't go to sleep hungry and that my kids didn't go to sleep hungry. We don't have the things we need like soap...things like gas, provisions. Sometimes, I say to my sons: "rice and lentils or rice and pees! But, at least, it's something to eat!"

Here I suffer a lot here because of the water situation. Sometimes the kids go for a long time without having a bath, and it's not just my kids. The water doesn't come and when it comes some of our neighbours go with their hoses to Camilo Daza where they get water taken from a

*pegue*<sup>13</sup>. As an example, someone says to me: "I have my house in Camilo Daza where there's a lot of water, and I say to them "give me or sell me some water, and they say: "get a hose – so many meters of hose – and I'll give you some water if you help me pay my monthly bills." Those that have a hose, great... those that don't... we're screwed!

Water arrives here on Sundays and Wednesdays. I only have water all day on Thursdays and I don't have a hose. Where would I store it? They lent me plastic containers and when I get laundry jobs at Camilo Daza, a lady there fills them up for me. When I don't have laundry jobs and I can't pay her, she gives me water and I wash a pile of clothes for her in exchange.

The electric bill comes to almost 400,000 pesos. I only use a light bulb, because I don't have anything else that uses electricity and the bill depends on use. The thing is that other people lived here before and they didn't pay the bill and it has grown and grown until it's reached nearly 400,000 pesos...I talked to the father, to see if he would give me an authorization to go and straighten it out, and he said: "we'll have to wait till they cut it off. When I have time I'll pass by there and see what we can do, write a letter..." Then they told me to go to Centrales<sup>14</sup> and talk to them there. But you need \$50,000 pesos to do that, and I don't have the money. So "they can come and cut the electricity, we'll live by candlelight. I don't have another choice, sometimes I have to do everything in the dark.

The father gave me this stove, a lady that was moving to Bogotá gave me this bed and a woman from San Vicente de Paul gave me this mattress. She came a few days ago to give it to me because I had been sleeping on the floor and my kids on boards. Thieves robbed the mattress that we had been given before. That's the way it's been for us...

### *Maybe we can go back*

At this moment, I don't know where my family is. A guy at Corprodinco took me to La

12 Neighbourhood of Cúcuta. 13 Clandestine derivation of water pipes. 14 Centrales Eléctricas del Norte de Santander, (Electrical Station of Norte de Santander), a public service company.

Opinion<sup>15</sup> so I could place a notice to see if maybe he appears but I haven't been able to find him. I've tried through radio stations, but I've come up with nothing that way either. I was in San Antonio<sup>16</sup> last week trying through a Venezuelan radio station, to see if maybe...And no, I don't have anyone helping me to find him, whether he's alive or dead. But I've been thinking to maybe wait until December and I don't know...I could go there Why not go back? Sometimes, I think that I will return in December, but not call, not say anything. The farm is in his name; we didn't finish paying it off. We still owe money to that man. Before they took my husband away we gave him some money, but not all of it. He sold it to us in 6 million pesos and we still haven't given it all to him. So the man said that when we finished paying him off, he would give us a *compraventa*<sup>17</sup>, nothing else, because he doesn't have those deeds either. Where coca is grown, they don't have those kind of papers, just a verbal promise between two people. They took my husband away and we haven't been able to communicate with him to see if maybe we can recover the farm. But I think that we've lost it, that maybe those people have taken it over... You never know

I've wanted to go back to look for him. Maybe if I go there, where we lived before, something will lead me to...Maybe I can get help from the woman who called me and she can take me to the tomb that they found, that they say is surrounded by *law*, and where the army doesn't venture. Yea, I understand it's terrible there. If God gives me strength, and helps me gain entrance into that area, I'm going to find out, I'll be able to check if my husband is there or not. But I'll have to wait and see. Maybe I can wait and see if between now and December I get some news. Something inside me tells me that he's okay, that he's not dead.

*It's not our fault that  
there's so much violence*

I'd like to say to those people that please, it would be better that they bring an end

to this violence, so much violence...The truth is that I don't know why, why they take the life of another human being. For example, in my case; I don't know why they took my man, why they took him. They took him away and me and my sons were left behind suffering, begging; we're not suffering hunger, but we're in need all the same. We've needed clothing; we're badly dressed. I would ask those people: please, for the children, no more violence, because it's not our fault as peasant farmers, it's not our fault that there is so much violence, so much war. We, the peasant farmers, are the ones to suffer most. And if there's a lady in my situation, I'd tell her that, in truth, it's not easy, but you have to have a lot of faith in God and move forward for the sake of the kids.

Sometimes I think it's all because of this cursed coca, because if there wasn't coca, if there wasn't this stuff, there wouldn't be so much war, so much violence. Because when they go and sell the stuff, they sell it to one group or the other, and if they sell it to one group, then the other takes revenge.

I don't have words to explain it, because I don't understand, I don't understand what one thing has to do with the other, why they take the life of a person, a human being, the father of a family, a hard worker moving forward in his life, a hard-working peasant farmer with lots of desire to move ahead with his children. I don't know why; why people appear who for no reason unscrupulously take life. They kidnap you for a misunderstanding.

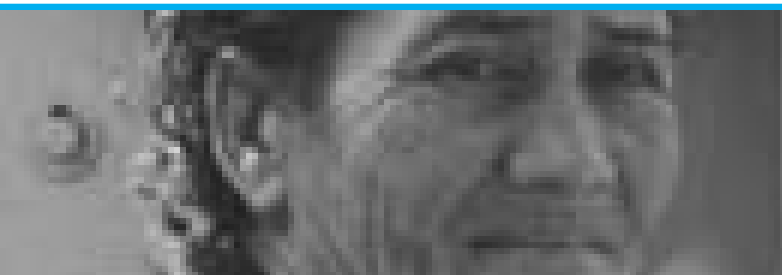
So, in my case, they misunderstood, because we never collaborated with anyone: it's just that the army passed through and asked for water. At no time could we deny them that; we gave them water because you can't deny anyone water. The army arrived and they camped out. Of course, they had weapons. Even if the land belonged to us, we couldn't say "leave." And when it wasn't those people, it was the others: so it's not our fault. It was a path from Spanish times. People passed through, but we didn't have anything to do with any of them. I don't know why this



happened to us, why they took him away. Maybe it's because of a misunderstanding; I don't know; I don't know. Around that same time, they killed one of our neighbours: they killed him in front of his wife and his daughter, a girl of 5.

So because of all that we pray every day and ask God that this president become aware of the situation and that this violence comes to an end. Because I think that the weapons come from

the president, that he supplies them. Sometimes I think that if it wasn't for these weapons, there wouldn't be so much violence, so many massacres. I don't know. Maybe the president should sit down and think about it a bit, that if he didn't supply weapons, there wouldn't be so much violence, there wouldn't be so many kids suffering from hunger and so many displaced people sleeping in the street.



*Because sometimes war arises.  
The war waged by these people is not our fault.  
We don't know why they shoot each other; we don't know why  
they drive so many people out of the countryside.*





## Lilia\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
42 years old.	Peasant farmer, mother of 7 children and newly pregnant.	Displaced from Guaviare to Bogotá.

### *We came with nothing but our clothes*

We lived for 16 years in Guaviare. They expelled us from the area when we had our farm, with all that a farm has: cattle, pastures and everything. We worked there for a long time, and when we had everything set up, they expelled us. Two kids stayed behind because they were far away when the group arrived and dislodged us. They were out rounding up cattle at the time.

Shortly after the events of Mampiripán<sup>1</sup> (Meta) – which is not too far away, nor too close – we heard on the news that they had killed people and beheaded them with chainsaws. I said to my husband: “Why don’t you sell some cattle or something and we’ll go someplace else and buy a house? Imagine that the same thing happens to us here. Where would we go with the kids?” No, all that we’ve earned working, we’ve invested in cattle for the farm! And then after all that happened to us, I would say to my husband: “remember what I told you but... they never pay attention to you!” Men are frequently stubborn, and they think that you are telling them lies and no: it’s often so realistic.

And the same thing came to pass there. How many people lost their lives to a chainsaw, or to whatever? Thank God, it didn’t happen to us. My God has given us our lives, allowing us to get away and be here alive. My husband says: “Lets

not remember that anymore, let’s not remember. What good would it do; by remembering, we’re not going to recover anything.”

We had to leave with the clothes we had on at the moment. We told them to let us sell a cow or something first so that we could get set up somewhere else. They told us that they would wait, but that they couldn’t take responsibility for what might happen. We thought about cases where they had uprooted a family or families and, if the families didn’t abandon their homes immediately, they were killed. We weren’t thinking of ourselves, but of our little children. We said: “They’re coming and will kill us and “what will happen to the kids? Let’s leave; may God not abandon us.”

### *They should have uprooted us when we were getting started*

As I said, they should have uprooted us when we were getting started. But they let us kill ourselves (working). On those lands you had to take a machete and mark out borders to be able to say ‘this is my farm.’ Then you start to hack down forests, plant and so give shape to your farm. That’s the way it was for us: it was unoccupied, virgin land. You’d have to go far to find land deeds in those (times) because around there,

\* Name changed at interviewee’s request. <sup>1</sup> Between July 1 and July 20, 1997, paramilitaries of the AUC – having arrived by plane from Córdoba, at the other end of the country – assassinated an undetermined number of people in that hamlet on the banks of the Guaviare River. In that massacre – the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2005 condemned the Colombian State for it – high-ranking officers of the army and public officials were implicated.

there were no documents or anything like that. If there weren't any, no one bothered you, since you could go and take land and nobody would say to you: "this land is mine," or anything like that. You could go and take it for yourself. And we had more or less 200 hectares.

We were sawing. We had ordered some wood sawed for a corral where the cattle could bathe. The house was wooden and well made. They came and uprooted us. When they were going to uproot us, we said to them: "you should of uprooted us, when we were getting started. Now we're all set up. Now you uproot us. Why?"

*And if you serve them,  
you're bad and if not..*

Around the time we left, they ejected around 10 families. There were many people who

were ejected. A group of paramilitaries would arrive and if you served them...For example, the guerrillas would arrive and they would ask you to make them lunch. What are you going to say: "no, I won't serve you," if they are an armed group! And then they would leave and the others arrive: "I need you to kill me a cow." How are you going to deny them? So, if you escape from one group, you don't escape from the other. There's no negotiating with any of them.

When we arrived in those parts, we heard mention of the guerrillas but, in any case, we never saw them. Those people were never even mentioned back there in Boyacá or Santander. All your life you heard of the guerrillas this and the guerrillas that, but you never saw them. At least, I never saw them. Then, after some time, they appeared. When the paramilitaries appeared, that's when meetings began to be held, both by the one group and the other, and you would hear stories.

At least when we were in Guaviare, we weren't affected by that kind of thing. But lately when people come from there, they tell stories: That if you sell "merchandise<sup>2</sup>" to the guerrillas,



then the paramilitaries kill you. And if you sell to the paramilitaries, the guerrillas...They don't forgive you. So, you don't know what to do.

For that reason, many people have left. Also because people live from coca there. You can't go there and grow yuca for sale. Who would you sell it to? Everyone grows it and it's too far to the town to transport and sell it there. The trucking costs more than what you can earn from yuca and plantains. So, you have to try to live from that (coca). Blessed be the Lord, I give him thanks, since there are many families who have died there. They're stubborn. Many of our friends have died there.

When we were there, we still didn't have to sell to them. But if they knocked at your farm house and demanded lunch, then you had to serve them, whatever group it was. You think that if they kill you, they kill you, right? But you end up thinking about the young people, the children. If they kill you, okay; but "where does that leave the children? what protection do they have? It puts you between a rock and a hard place: you don't know what to do.

#### *The children which were left behind*

We went to Bogotá with our other children to try our luck. The ones who stayed behind ended up at the homes of their godfathers and friends. We left messages for them that they not leave, that this and that thing had happened to us. We also told our friends that lived near the farm what had happened.

We came with nothing but a few clothes. Sometimes people gave us pots so we could cook. People even gave us clothes, people helped us who had suffered themselves, while the Red<sup>3</sup> (Network) gave us some help. The International Red Cross helped us with humanitarian aid in the form of provisions.

We sustained ourselves a bit with that. The difficulty was to find a way to return to some other part of the countryside. But we were waiting for our children who had stayed behind.

They went to live with another branch of our family – my husband has family there, the grandmother – and they went to live at the grandmother's house, far from where we were displaced. They ended up growing up there. They would come visit us and then turn around and go back because they said that they didn't like the city. Their life is in the countryside, and, apart from the countryside, there's nothing for them.

When one of them was 16, a group took him away. He was able to escape, come here, and denounce it. But he wasn't given any help, because he was a minor, and we were badly off. So he turned around and left again for another part of the countryside. We don't know where he is now. But we have been threatened, because he has been fingered.

As they didn't give him any assistance, he left. Because when he was 16, he had a little plot of land that he cultivated – we talked about how in Guaviare, you worked with cattle and coca. He had his crops and had even gotten a girl pregnant. They were living together. Then he escaped from those people<sup>4</sup> and came here, while the pregnant women stayed behind. He came to see if maybe they would help him, I mean the Red, because when I came and made my declaration they didn't let me include my children who were left in Guaviare in the letter<sup>5</sup>. They excluded them from the inscription because they weren't with us at the time. I said: "but they are my children, and they could arrive at any moment." But they excluded them from the inscription anyway, saying that when they arrived, they would have to make their declaration. And so, my 16 year old son returned and made his declaration.

No he's gone and we don't know where. In his declaration, he said that he had escaped from the group that had him and that he was fleeing. With him fleeing, the whole family is in danger because there are those kind of people everywhere. Now we don't know where he is and we're worried. You suffer in silence thinking of the situation.

2 Coca base. 3 Refers to the Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network). 4 From the guerrillas. 5 Refers to the letter issued by the Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network) accrediting someone as a displaced person and permitting him or her access to services and programs of assistance.

### *Sometimes it makes you sad*

That was 1999, between August and October. I don't even remember anymore; I've got the date there in the declaration. By now, I've forgotten and I say: "why bother remembering!" Sometimes it makes you sad. For us the day that we had to leave was really tough, especially with respect to the animals. We had dogs: when we were getting on the bus, they just sat down and cried... and it makes you sad. It makes you sad to think that you'll never see the dear animals again.

When we were displaced, we lost cattle, the farm, horses, goats, chickens, dogs, the water pumps. Everything that a farm is. I didn't put that in the declaration, wanting to finish fast, but it was a big loss for us, because we had that water pump and an electric generator. Yea, it was terrible. My God!

I've always had a lot of faith in my God because he's been with us in good times and bad, and he hasn't left us defenceless, and I know he stays by our side. As long as you behave well, my God doesn't leave you on your own. I always ask my God to give us strength, to give us great ability, and to keep giving us great strength to resist. We don't know what else will befall us. Because this no, this no..!

### *The first kids had everything*

The best thing was knowing everyday that you were going to milk 11 cows: from that we made cottage cheese for people, for the workers for the neighbours. We gave away milk and cottage cheese. When there wasn't beef, you could kill a chicken, and if there were pigs, we would kill a pig and there would be enough for the workers and everyone else. That was nice. If you want to eat a plantain here you've got to shell out 500 pesos<sup>6</sup> for totally ugly plantains. There you could cut from the plantain trees or get yuca from the yuca crops. If you're hungry in the countryside, it's because you're lazy. It's because you don't farm.

Yea, we lived well. In any case, we weren't short of anything and we had the hap-

piness of knowing that the oldest three sons had everything. By comparison, the younger ones have had a lot tougher situation, and even the older ones lately. They're not as happy as before. They even have to ask for bread, and one day we didn't have that. But when they were children, the three or four oldest ones never lacked for what they wanted. We could give them snacks and some money to take to school. With the youngest, there are times where I can spend barely 200 pesos on each of them for snacks.

### *Sometimes I have nothing to give them*

They say "mom if we hadn't been uprooted, how would things be for us?" We'd already have our own car!" Back then we'd been working to sell cattle so we could buy a car, and we would have been okay. We wouldn't be here putting up with the cold. That's what they say to us. And I say to them: "yea, my child, but in any case, the wheels of life turn: you don't know where they'll stop." You're born, but you don't know where you'll die! Look: dad is from Boyacá; I was raised in Santander and, look, how far away we are..."

The most difficult thing is knowing that lots of times you're without work and you don't have anything to give them. It's really tough because there have been times when – it's not the case now – when he works and then the contractors run off. They don't pay him. Now he has an income, but they only pay him a little which is, at least, enough for some food.

But it's not the same as it was before. We can't say that we're feeding our children very well, because we aren't. If you're poor you can only buy the cheapest stuff: rice, potatoes, yuca, and, occasionally, an egg. We can't consistently give them, for example, meat. Nothing like that. So it's very difficult; it really is difficult.

I thank God that the district schools<sup>7</sup> are providing snacks these days. My two, no my three youngest kids are in those schools. But they don't give anything to my child who's in high

school. You suffer silently thinking that some of the kids have food and the others don't. In any case, you want the best for your kids, even if they are already old. You have to suffer in silence knowing that today my little kids have snacks and the other one doesn't.

You end up thinking so many things! Sometimes I say: "ay, Señor!, now it us who are doing okay...even poorer are the people who don't even have that!" At least you're eating a little here in the city; how is it for people who have absolutely nothing? Where are they going to eat? There below a bridge sleeping with their kids... Where will this problem of displacement end? You say to yourself: "fine, it's already happened to us," but you don't wish a life of displacement on anyone, on anyone.

I can see that the situation here in the city is terrible for a child: I've seen 12 and 14-year-old children smoking. There in the countryside, it's 16 and 17 year-old kids who smoke; here you see them smoking as soon as they get out of school. They even smoke marijuana!

It makes me think: "what I want to do is hurry back to the countryside, so that my kids don't see any of this." Still, I say: "My Lord, my God, give us permission to raise our kids," not like we were raised, with a stick – because they treated us really badly – but yea, I ask God a lot for help in raising my kids, so that they not end up as criminals. Because I see a lot of decadent behaviour here in Bogotá, both in the boys and the girls.

If only we could get some aid, we might provide a better education for our kids. And if only the government would look at these street kids and try to get all these young people off drugs. Our kids wouldn't have to see it. Because there are 12 year-old kids ready to put a knife in anyone to try and rob them.

#### *When will they take my house away*

The time came when they occupied the Red Cross<sup>8</sup>, and I went and got involved. I was pregnant with my daughter and we ended up

winning our *tutela*<sup>9</sup> (legal suit) and they gave us our house. They took it away again. They told us that we had to...that those who didn't ask for a loan...because I didn't want to ask for the loan they were giving...and they made us understand that then there wouldn't be any houses. So I said: "whatever happens, happens, but I'm going to do it. Let's buy the house. We're in God's hands!"

The result of the *tutela* (legal suit) was that they would give us a monthly subsidy to support our kids, while the project<sup>10</sup> got going. What happened? We didn't succeed. None of our companions with whom we won the legal suit succeeded. Because today they give you \$2,900,000 pesos... but what..!: they give you half today, and then six or eight months or a year later, they give you the rest. From today to when they give you the rest of the money, you will have had to buy things, and what finishes the money off is what you spend in transport, food. Why wait? If you buy display shelves, if you buy all that stuff, what are you going to do with everything stored away? So that's why we went broke and they said the loan that they gave us was for 3 million pesos or 3,600,000.

They gave me half. With that half I worked to see how I could get my business going. But I had all those kids. And my business was installed in that house they gave me which was in a useless spot, a very isolated one. Imagine, I could sell only 10,000 pesos worth of things in a day there! I sold potatoes, plantains, and a bit of everything; I even installed a tejo court. At first, I did well. But then I didn't: people got tired of seeing the place so isolated. Everyone wants a place in the centre of the city. I thought to myself: "to be able to get a place down below<sup>11</sup>, I'll have to spend \$200,000 pesos. That would be cheap for there, and that's just for the rent. So I stayed where I was.

So when they gave me the money from the bank, which was only half, I went to stay with my family in Santander who were growing tamarillo<sup>12</sup>. I grew tamarillo. I invested nearly 1,600,000 pesos apart from transportation costs, because I

8 On December 14, 1999, nearly 125 displaced families peacefully occupied for around 3 years the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Bogotá. They sought to draw the attention of the public opinion and demand that the government fulfil its obligations to displaced communities. 9 Article 86 of the Constitution of 1991: "Any person will have an action of *tutela* to demand before judges [...] the immediate protection of his fundamental constitutional rights, when those are violated or threatened by the action or omission of any public authority." 10 Refers to economic assistance for setting up a productive business. 11 The neighbourhoods with the best socio-economic conditions are either in the flat parts of Bogotá or the low parts of the slopes of the city. 12 Fruit.

hadn't taken into account transport. They were 800, almost 900 tamarillo trees. The trees were growing new branches, and you have to be constantly applying fertilizer, applying everything. My plants were just getting going, they were already flowering. I went and looked and I already had small fruits. When I went to look at them the last time, a disease had covered the fruit and the whole plantation was ruined. I lost everything! Everything was destroyed!

They were giving me my monthly subsidy and from that I was paying the bank. When we went to get the check in April – because I have everything noted down – I couldn't get it. They had taken the monthly subsidy away because I owed money to the bank. But I was paying the bank, I was paying. I have the papers from the bank and everything showing that I was paying...! I only stopped paying when they took away my monthly subsidy.

*And here the state displaces us*

I didn't have a job when all that was happening, because I couldn't get one. My husband, he was working. But the contractors left without paying and we were left with our arms crossed. I end up paying 13 instalments to the bank. What's happened? I fear that at any time they can come and expropriate my house. Because I can't pay.

The only thing I think about morning and night is when they're going to come and take my house away. We left the countryside as displaced people, leaving all our things behind, and now it's practically the state that displaces us: "Where are we going to go? That's what I think about day and night: "My Lord, where are we going to go with all our kids? Where am I going to put them? If they take my house away, then what? That's my fear.

The day before yesterday, a "doctor<sup>13</sup>" from the bank called, saying, please, come to the bank so we can figure out how to pay that debt off. But imagine: Me, allowing my kids to suf-

fer hunger! If I work one day, I make 14,000 or 16,000 pesos. That's 2,000 pesos in transport and the rest I use to try and feed my kids. Where is this going to end? Every day, I go to sleep and wake up: "Lord, are they going to take my house away? With what am I going to pay (the instalments)? Where am I going to get the money?

I dream I can solve this bank problem and live with my kids. I dream that by the grace of God my sons return, or that we can go and live in the countryside again: not where they ejected us from, but to some other place in the countryside. I'm here because of an obligation, not because I want to be. I ask my God that he not forget me, that one day I will be able to live in the countryside with my children; that I will be able to live as I did before and not have to think: "ay!, I have to pay for that utility; I have to buy food; pay the water bill so they don't cut it off..." That's my dream, that maybe by God's grace they won't take my house away. Where would I take my children?

I would like the people from Inurbe<sup>14</sup> to at least visit me at the house they gave me – at that unfinished house. Inurbe never came to visit me. They said that they had to pay me a visit so that they could see my house and all the leaks here! When it's winter, we try to roll up the mattress so it doesn't get wet. Late at night, what a problem! And now I want someone to visit me and realize how much displaced people suffer. Because some displaced people were given houses in areas of high risk<sup>15</sup>. Others were given houses where more water falls inside than outside. You go to work and come back. And My God!. I find my bed wet, my kitchen all soaked. It's very sad. And even so, they want to take it away from us!

*And when I have my baby,  
who will give me work?*

I have a job now, thank God!. It's two days a week. But if they haven't fired me, it's perhaps because God has touched their hearts: now that I'm pregnant, nobody wants to give me work because they think I can't do it.

13 In Colombia, the title of doctor or doctora is given to a person perceived as superior, socially or economically, irrespective of whether he has an academic title; in this case, it refers to a important official of the bank. 14 Instituto Nacional de Vivienda de Interés Social y Reforma Urbana (National Institute of Social Housing and Urban Reform), currently being liquidated. 15 Refers to zones of geologically unstable slopes, where, nonetheless, many neighbourhoods exist.



I've seen lots of pregnant women that don't do anything, and the kids are born sicker than mine were born when I worked every day. Because I've had to work in the countryside during the nine months of my pregnancies. Maybe people ignore you because you don't have an education. But we who come from the countryside are often more active. We have a lot of skills and lots of experience.

After giving up working, I'm working again. My God, what am I going to do? They've sent me for five exams. From the hospital where they were seeing me, they've sent me to (the hospital of) Meissen<sup>16</sup>. There they said I had to go again to Uba<sup>17</sup>, so that they could give me the authorization for Meissen. And I said to the girl at Meissen: "but they sent me from there, "why do you make me go all over the place?" don't you see that I don't have money? I have to get transport. If I don't have money, I can't get transport." And I've been running all over the place because I have been unable to get those exams. They're for AIDS, a CAT<sup>18</sup> scan, a smear test, and a test for blood sugar and. I can't remember what else.

The CAT scan is for the attack... When I was 9, we arrived at my mom's house and I went to sleep. She called out to me – she was like those women back then that would call out to you: "hey, move it, move it!" Of course, I got up all frightened and as soon as I entered the living room, I fell. It was around two in the afternoon. By eight, I still hadn't come to. They were ready to put me in a box and hold a wake over me, when one of my older brothers came and put a mirror in front of me: "she's coming to, she's coming to!" And when I regained consciousness, when I woke up, I could hear people by my side. But they were ready to light the candles, because I hadn't woken up.

After that I lasted eight years; no, it was less, because I had already started to study. But when I started to study, I had to stop because I would start to write and I would feel an attack coming on. My notebooks would be nothing but scribbles: "I can't study any more. What am I going to do?," I said to myself. In those days, parents didn't worry about taking you to the doctor to see what was wrong. No, they left me as I was. Then when I came to Bogotá – because I worked and was a single woman in Bogotá – the boss took me to get an X-ray. But since I didn't go back, I never knew the result.

Sometimes I lasted, five to eight years without it happening to me. It's been six years now since it last happened, since when I had my daughter. Never have I had two or three attacks in a day. Once it happens...no more! But when I had my daughter, I had four or five attacks in a row. Since then, I haven't had a single one. Sometimes I think an attack is like blood, because when I'm pregnant it doesn't happen. When I'm about to have my period, it happens, or at least, it's about to happen when I quickly take a pill. The pill eases it a lot.

I feel relaxed about it, since I ask my God not to let it happen. But after I have my baby, whose going to give me work? How am I going to help pay the utilities and other things? You don't earn much, you get by with what you earn.

They say so often that Our Lord will come that it makes you sceptical. I say: "Lord, if that's true, why don't you come and take all of us with you? That way the whole problem will be resolved! But living day by day becomes ever more terrible. At least, at this age, from one day to the next you die and it's over! But the small creatures, your children, what will happen to them?"



PUTUMAYO







## Anaís\*

### AGE

30 years old.

### BACKGROUND

Mother of two girls.

### DETAILS

Displaced with her family from Villa Garzón (Putumayo) to Pasto (Nariño).

I grew up in a humble family, consisting of my dad, my mom, and two older brothers. My father was a person very... how would you say it? – ignorant because he raised us just as he had been raised. My mother was a very rough person who believed – as they say today – that you learn by bleeding (through punishment). That's how it was with us. It was a very tough childhood: we lived on farms, raising animals. I didn't have the childhood that some have today: with dolls, for example. Nothing of the sort. I spent time with my brothers, though they were as rough as my father and mother.

My father – in accordance with his ideas – paid for our education until the fourth grade. Sometimes my parents couldn't give us the things that the school demanded. Once I had to make a curtain of straws. But my father didn't want to buy the straws for me, saying that it wasn't necessary, that the only important things were a pencil and a notebook. And I ended up thinking: "Why does such-and-such have things and I don't?" These days, I get to thinking. I say to myself: "My daughters don't have to go through that. However I do it, I have to give them what they need." Until the fourth grade, my father helped me out, but after that, from the fifth grade into high school, I paid for things myself.

I worked in the kitchen – as they say

here, as a housewife-cook – working from six in the morning to four in the afternoon. Then I studied from six in the afternoon until ten at night. It was hard work: I worked in the kitchen, fixing up the house, washing, ironing, and taking care of kids. I was just 14 years old! And I was responsible for myself. I don't know what it's like for my father or my mother or brother to say: "I give you a pencil." That's why it makes me sad, looking back: that they didn't help me, though I was the only girl in the house.

My older brother became independent from my parents when he was 16. He began to work here and there and he did well. My other brother was a headache for my mother: he began to visit the different farms and drink there. He began to spin out of control. But neither of them ever said: "Let's help our sister." Never.

My mom had a leather whip: with the two or three lashes she gave you, she left your legs all busted up. My grandparents had raised my parents that way, and my parents thought that was the way to raise us. With my middle brother, I would go and play in the pastures and we always had fun, though we knew that when we got home we would be hit. We played so much! We would run around, grab the horses, climb things... It was a crime all the fun we had... but we did it!

My brother feels a lot of bitterness to-

\* Name changed at interviewee's request.

wards my parents because they were very rough on him. By comparison, they didn't hit my older brother, who had a different upbringing. We don't know why they preferred him to us. But since he was a child, they liked him better, and we noticed.

My middle brother says: "If my mother hadn't punished me so much since I was a kid, I would have gone to the towns to work and maybe I wouldn't have misspent the money I earned as I did: no I would have said to myself 'my mother needs things, I'll send her some money.'" But no: he misspent his money. He says: "If my mother had been a different person, she wouldn't have been so rough on me and treated me that way..." He feels a lot of bitterness, anger.

The place I remember best, that I liked the best was Puerto Limón (Putumayo). It was a big house made of...there they call it yaripe<sup>1</sup> – they cut it in poles and spread it so that the wall, of bamboo poles, ends up being round. The floor was also made from yaripe. We had a big garden. We had lots of fruits trees – so many...! And that's how I lived when I was 12 years old. There was a stream where we played. It was really lovely!

We also liked going to the beach down by the River Caquetá. We liked to go there barefoot and walk on the sand and the stones. When the canoes arrived, we would collect the plantains that fell from the boxes and gather them up in our backpacks. We would fish and return to our house with the plantains. That's what we most liked to do.

I really liked the life in the countryside, but looking back at what happened

to me, what we've suffered until now and what we're going through today, I want to get my own house here in the city so my daughters don't have to experience all that.

### *Why did she accuse me?*

I was a person that, perhaps because of my mother – I don't know if it was her that taught us – didn't have friends and was a bit solitary. Then in high school, I started making friends.

Gloria was a friend: she was like a sister to me – as I never had a sister – and she was my confidant. We talked, we told each other things, we looked out for each other. If our boyfriends cheated on us, we told each other. She was a lovely person. Then a problem arose that separated us forever and turned us into the worst enemies.

We made a pact. I had gotten involved with the father of my daughters in school and she had gotten involved with another boy. According to our pact, whoever had a child first would name the other as godparent. But around that time, the paracos (the paramilitaries) arrived in town. I didn't know what would happen. She got pregnant. I had my girl, and she had a boy. Then I was resting after the pregnancy and I didn't visit her. My husband wouldn't let me; he would say to me: "No, don't go" because he suspected something. It turned out that my friend's husband was see-



ing someone else. When I went to visit her later, I didn't say anything about it. I knew what was going on, but I didn't say anything, except to talk of her pregnancy and mine. Never did I mention the issue of her husband being with the other woman. Then her husband came to our house and started insulting my husband. He asked why my husband didn't have the guts to punch me in the mouth. Then he got in a huff with me and said that he was going to get the paracos (paramilitaries) to kill me. I said to my husband: "But Juan, I haven't done or told him anything. If you want, I'll tell her the whole thing." My husband said 'no', that it wasn't worth it. But it hurt me so! If she was my friend, with all that I cared for her, why did she accuse me? If I hadn't said anything, who was she covering up for? And since then, we've cut our friendship.

#### *Why do they let them do what they do?*

I never spoke to her again. But, I don't know, I would look at her, and feel so much bitterness... That sisterly love that I had for her turned into hatred. I couldn't see her as a friend, and I lost track of her.

When they [the paramilitaries] arrived here, they said that they would take away, tie up and punish any woman who gossiped. Any woman making remarks about other people would be tied up, hung from something, and given the strap... That day my husband Juan came home and cried. I said: "I swear on my mother and my daughter that I didn't say anything to her. That what hurts me so much: that she would say otherwise." "But how are we going to stop those guys [the paramilitaries]?" he asked. And I said: "Let them come and we'll see what the problem is." And no, not one of them came.

Then everything turned ugly, horrible, horrible. It had been a peaceful town, nice: you could be out until late at night and nothing would happen to you. You didn't hear anything. You could go to the river and you wouldn't find any dead bodies or anything. But when those guys

came into town for the first time, they arrived with weapons. They drove through the streets on their motorcycles, armed, frightening people. At six in the afternoon, you didn't see anybody out and about anymore: everyone was scared. Then eight days after they arrived, assassins showed up. You would find bodies chopped to pieces and cadavers dumped in the river.

We were stunned because – I'm from there – nearby is the anti-narcotics base, the Domingo Rico battalion, the National Police. There are three bases nearby. We said: "Why do they let those people move about and do what they do?" We even spoke to the mayor. We asked 'why?', if Villa Garzón and Mocoa are only 45 minutes away and that the DAS<sup>2</sup> and the SIJÍN<sup>3</sup> are there. We said "What's going on?" Because when those men found someone in the countryside that had been fingered as a guerrilla, they didn't care if that person was with their children, they didn't care if he was with his wife. They would seize him, take him away in a taxi and – done! 'Go and pick him up, he's dead.'

They chopped people up with chain-saws, they cut their tongues out, they burned them with acid. Sometimes friends would disappear, and people would say: "let's go look for them," and I would go and help. Shortly afterwards, we would find them, though some of the disappeared were never found.

There was a person who was referred to as the 'town leader.' Her name was María Benavides and they called her *the Nun*. That lady died, killed by the paracos, because she defended the community and even called the army to ask them why all this was happening. She fought with the mayor, with the inspector, with the SIJIN, the DAS. She defended the town so much that the paracos killed her. That made people afraid to fight back.

Though people in Putumayo were very peaceful and wholesome, there were massacres throughout the department. I heard that things in Villa Garzón turned awful. They say that there were lots of guerrillas there and that the paramilitaries were after the guerrillas. But now the

1 Stem of the guadua (bamboo) which has been pressed so as to form a mat. 2 Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (Administrative Department of Security), the Civilian Intelligence Service. 3 Seccional de Policía Judicial y de Investigaciones (Judicial Investigation and Intelligence Service).

paracos aren't there anymore. The town came together and the SIJÍN and the DAS moved against them (the paracos). Now the problem is with the guerrillas. My oldest brother came here eight days ago and said that he was there two months ago and that the town was calm, safe and sound. We'll see what happens. You don't see the guerrillas around there anymore; they're far away. They're not around there anymore, my brother says.

#### *The guerrillas said he was a snitch*

Our problem was because of my husband, who looked like a soldier and had friends who had joined the army. One day, they went and drank a beer in town together. Then he returned home, to the farm. But the guerrillas said he was a snitch and that he had been with the soldiers, snitching. From then on, they began to keep an eye on him. They hit him, they hit me – I was pregnant at the time – and they hit my little girl, who is now 6. They were going to kill him because (who said) he was a snitch.

They had us virtually imprisoned. Because if he left the farm, he was supposedly communicating with them (the army). So we couldn't leave the farm, because they (the guerrillas) find out about everything: they know everything you're doing. People have to subject themselves to whatever they say, to their law; it's not the law as we know it, but their law. There is a law of the town and a law of the wilderness<sup>4</sup> and you're subjected to the law of the wilderness.

The man who gave us the farm left because of the problem of the guerrillas, and my husband became nervous and lost weight: "this is not for me; you're pregnant, and one day they'll drive us from here." No, we didn't feel the same anymore. We felt that maybe they would even drive us from our house.

#### *Coca is easy money, it's no problem!*

Easy, easy – it's not that easy there. But yes, because if you produce merchandise<sup>5</sup>, you

know that you can produce a kilo or two, put it in your pocket, and sell it; while if you grow plantains, you produce four bunches and they give you 10,000 pesos<sup>6</sup> and... all that you've sweated! By comparison, you produce your two kilos, and you get 2 or 3 million (pesos): it's easy money, it's no problem!

You get involved in that because as a peasant farmer, you're sometimes humiliated by people who sell your products... How you struggle! I say it out of personal experience, because I've been doing it since I was a little girl. Let's say you plant a bush of yuca<sup>7</sup>; let's say half a lot, half a hectare of yuca; I take my four loads and I take them to town. I've struggled to produce it since I was little: I've planted it, grown it, weeded, applied pesticide. I've taken care of it so it gives me a good product. So I plant it and within six months, I'm harvesting it and taking my two loads to town. But people aren't going to pay me for all my struggle. For example, I ask for 20,000 pesos for the load and those in the market say "no, I'll give you 10,000," "okay,!" I say because I need money to survive: "How much is that small mountain of yuca worth?," asks a customer. "Two thousand." And they pay me, earning three times as much as me. So the peasant farmer is sometimes right in doing whatever is easiest. I know that if I grow coca and produce my kilo that no one will humiliate me: I sell as it is! It's the only option; they pay you better; they screw you less. That's why I sometimes say: "(people from) the countryside are humiliated by people from the city or town." The guerrillas don't pressure you. They just look at your crop and charge you 'vacuna,' which is a percentage, and let you do your work.

#### *You earn money sweating for it*

Not everything is the wilderness; not everything is easy money: you earn your money sweating for it. The experience of being displaced has made me more mature. We ended up living in Pasto and my husband went to work in a discothèque and then a radio station in Cauca. Then



he began to go out with other people and it was really difficult not having him around, knowing that he was forgetting about us. But there were people who gave us strength and helped us and I began to move forward.

When I had just gotten there, it was really tough. I had to learn to take a city bus, but then I started to get to know people, to socialize, to take courses and train. I began adapting, getting to know the city. I received – the first time that I made a declaration – help from Pastoral Social<sup>8</sup>: provisions, including clothes for my baby – because I was pregnant. I also got a blanket from the Aldea Global (Global Village)<sup>9</sup>, three months of rent and food.

He stayed in Cauca because it was easy to work there. There were times he helped us out [in supporting the girls] and others that he didn't. He left in October and just came back now, almost in March, seven months after leaving. Our relationship is the same, but I don't depend on him anymore. I try to support my daughters on my own, doing any work I can get: washing, dusting off, putting the music on, fixing the light. And that's what we're doing.

I've been treated well here. But it's hard not to be – how should I say? – a duck out of water. It's strange, because this is a city, and things are different in the wilderness. There are lots of things to learn here, and we've learned a lot. But sometimes it's difficult for us. The rent can be very expensive and there is no money with which to

buy food. Like now: we don't have any work and things are really hard. There in the countryside, we fished and gathered plantains and could eat. But here, by comparison, it's very hard: If you don't have 200 pesos to buy a plantain, you can't eat.

I feel good, but the rent has me depressed. It's what has most me dejected, that we're three months behind on rent and indebted. It scares us.

We've become aware that people in Pasto are very selfish. Not everyone, of course. Up to now, no one has discriminated against me, but you see the selfishness. It's what my husband has experienced: he is a DJ<sup>10</sup> but they haven't allowed him to get to know the person [who can help him]. That's what really affects us.

We want them to help us get work. My husband is a professional: he is a professional mechanic trained in el Sena,<sup>11</sup> and he is a professional DJ, my husband. My goal is to set up my own house and my own stand, my own business: for example, selling minutes<sup>12</sup>. If I can get a loan, I will set up my own business and be my own boss. And when I have work, everything will look different!

We want to be together and give our daughters everything they need. Together or not together – you never know from one moment to the next who will stray from the path – continuing to overcome the difficulties. But we don't want them to fool us, because they've told us they would give us a small business loan and, to this moment, they still haven't come through.

8 An organization connected to the Episcopal Conference of Colombia. It's part of the network of Caritas Internationalis, a confederation of 154 Catholic organizations in 198 countries and territories of the world. 9 Fundación Aldea Global (Global Village Foundation), an ngo based in Pasto (Nariño). 10 Short for disc jockey, the person who puts on music in a dance hall. 11 Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Training Service). 12 Cellular telephone calls.

CHOCÓ









# Luis Angel\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
30 years old.	Peasant farmer.	He was forcibly displaced from the Jiguamiandó <sup>1</sup> valley and later came back to the Pueblo Nuevo humanitarian zone Chocó.

## *Before things were fine*

I've been interested in education since I was seven, ever since my father sent me to school, and I finished my primary education when I was 17, in 1991. It seemed so important to me that I should continue my studies, but unfortunately my dad didn't have the resources. So I had no option but to dedicate myself to farming. I got myself a partner, and we worked together and fortunately, as of today, we've got six children.

The situation before was fine. First and foremost, each family lived in one place. They had a place to themselves and people were able to move freely from one place to another. Business was absolutely no problem, we were able to sell everything we grew in the main local towns. Corn, yuca (cassava) and plantains grew here, there was some forestry and even some gold. That's what people lived off. An association of plantain farmers was set up in the Jiguamiandó valley to collect all the produce and take it to market in cities like Cartagena and Monteria. Yuca was also important to the region. Vehicles even came as far as the local communities to buy it. The timber was transported by the Jiguamiandó river, which at the time was very wide.

## *Each one left as they could*

As time went on, problems began to arise and people couldn't leave. There was even an economic blockade and the situation began to turn violent, which meant that the people had to abandon their land.

As I watched the violence unfold, one of the things I thought was that they were indiscriminately laying communities to waste though those communities were innocent. They turned up in the towns and villages and wiped out whole families at a time. I thought my children were going to end up orphans, without father or mother. The situation we were living even made me think that our family might disappear altogether.

The people had to leave in 1997. When displacement came, we had to leave without a say in the matter because it happened suddenly. It was started with an operation called Genesis<sup>2</sup> under the command of a general called Rito Alejo del Rio<sup>3</sup>. It began in the area of the Lower Atrato river, in the Truandó, Salaquí and Domingodó valleys<sup>4</sup>. It was there that the indiscriminate bombing of communities started.

When the people left, they left with nothing. At the same time as other communities were taking in the displaced people, a wave of paramilitary assaults was also taking place. When it came to the crunch, each one had to leave as

\* Named changed at interviewee's request. 1 Tributary of the Atrato river in the Urabá Chocoano region. 2 A military operation carried out in February 1997 by the 17th brigade of the Colombian army, headquartered at Carepa, Antioquia. 3 Commander of the 17th brigade from 1995 to 1997 and removed from the army by President Pastrana under intense pressure from the United States because of his links to paramilitary groups. In 2004, the Fiscalía (Attorney General's Office) closed its investigation because they had insufficient evidence to press charges. 4 In the Urabá Antioqueño region.

they could – they had to leave everything they owned; their homes and all their goods, their animals and their crops. Some of us had to leave with nothing more than the clothes we were wearing, others without a shirt on their back, others barefoot. People didn't even have time to put their boots on. I wasn't able to take anything at all. I didn't even have time, for example, to pick up my 5th grade certificate. I had to leave it, and I lost my diploma.

Our communities fled to the Pavarandó area, in the municipality of Mutatá, and we had to stay there for 17 months, in appalling conditions. We lived under plastic roofs and disease such as malaria, diarrhoea and flu were rife. Some children even died because there weren't the facilities to be able to look after them.

### *Giving life to defend the land*

When we returned in 1999, we found all the settlements destroyed. With our own efforts, and with the help of organisations that were worried about our fate, we managed to put a few roofs over people's heads. But such was the level of violence in the area in 2001 that those settlements – rebuilt by ourselves, not by the state but by ourselves – were burned down again.

Before we were displaced, the homes we had were good homes, yes, because each peasant farmer had the means to make their home, a home where one could sleep peacefully, without being disturbed. They were happy times, there was a good feeling of harmony. Each peasant farmer had a good home, they bought their zinc<sup>5</sup> and they had good crops to live off, to survive. But today our homes are of the very worst kind. We have to live in plastic houses<sup>6</sup> and often, even if someone can help us with the roof, for example, we don't have the means to build the walls. We're completely vulnerable, because the state doesn't cooperate or support or come through for the communities as it should.

These days, our communities can't count on freedom of movement, we can't leave to sell our produce because of the economic blockade. We can't get our produce out. The roads are blocked and so we can't use them. We can't rely on the river either, because it, let's say, is also blocked – with sediment. All that means that families are in a dire economic situation.

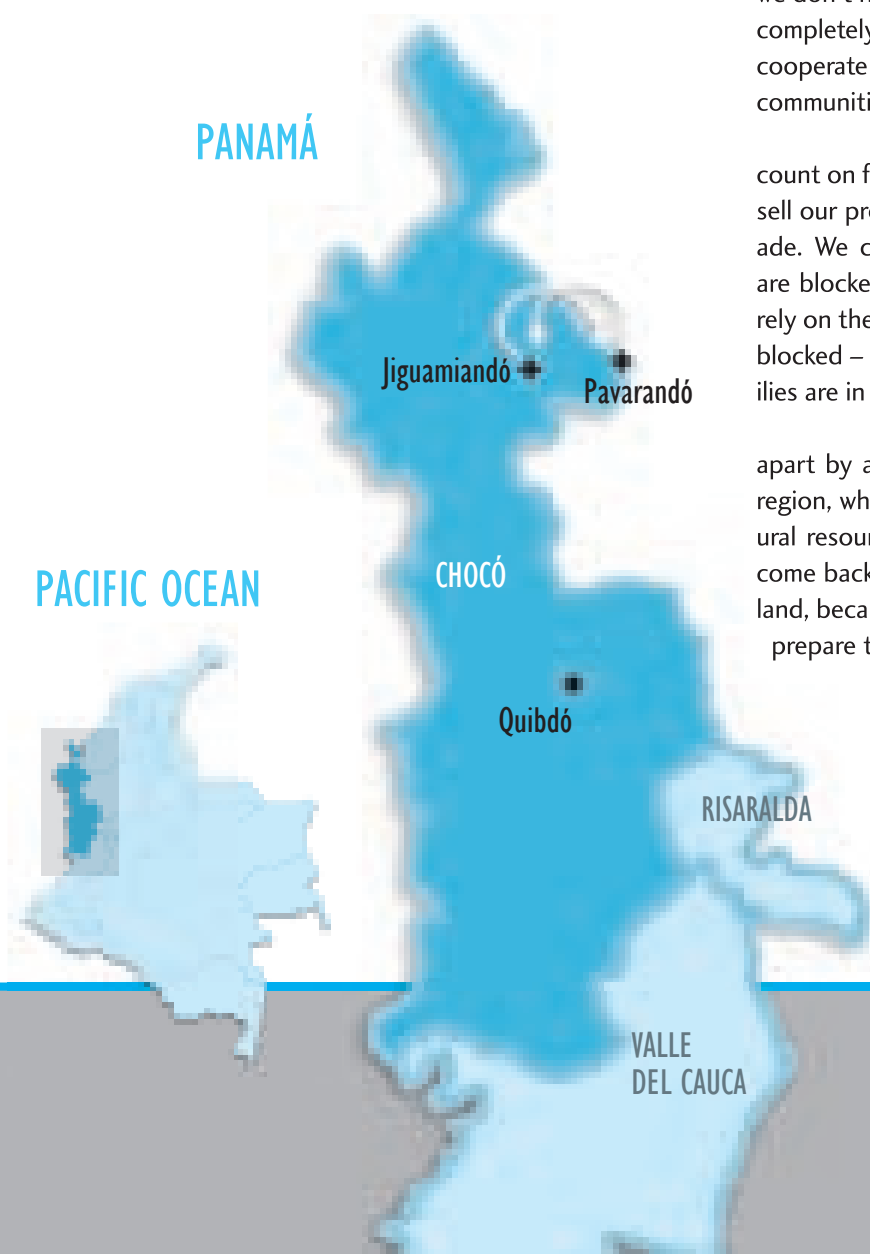
Our ways of getting by are being torn apart by a number of projects intended for our region, which are indiscriminately destroying natural resources. This means we have to leave, we come back again and risk our lives defending our land, because it's the only way we can get by and prepare the children for the future.

My wife and I often talk and some-

## ATLANTIC OCEAN

## PANAMÁ

## PACIFIC OCEAN



times we think that it's our children that we worry about most. The conditions they're living in – for example. They haven't got good clothes; in fact they're really badly dressed. There isn't enough even to buy them a pair of boots, a pair of sandals to wear. Things like that are a constant worry, and it bothers the children a lot too. Sometimes we get thinking about all this, and we see that town life would also be really difficult for us as peasant farmers who are not in the kind of conditions economically to easily get a job in town. It's really difficult for us – you look around and you see educated people, people with degrees even, and they're broke, with no job. So what's it going to be like for someone who can't even make it to the door of the university? And that makes us think that at least we have our land, something which is an ancestral gift from our grandparents, an inheritance they left us so each of us can survive and provide a future for our children.

#### *The strategy of the humanitarian zones<sup>7</sup>*

Aware that we were in an area where the conflict was intense, we had to find another way forward for ourselves...they said that we weren't peasant farmers, that we were a subversive group, just because we lived in an area where the guerrillas operated. As peasant farmers, we couldn't be blamed for living in a guerrilla area, so we had to find another way of identifying ourselves as civilians and we looked to the strategy of the humanitarian zones.

One of the ways of organising, one of the alternatives for defending our land, was to form community councils, which are the maximum authority for dealing with the government on matters concerning land. The other alternative was the humanitarian zones, because they were places where we could identify ourselves as civilians, places no armed groups were allowed to enter, a place exclusively for civilians from where we could defend our land.

On the down side, what struck me was the way in which they wanted to get us out of

here, off our land. I mean, the way they wanted to use force to drive off all the peasant farmers living in the area. Why would they do that to us peasant farmers, who've always been here, been the owners of all this land? And who, more than being owners, have a collective title that includes the entire territory?<sup>8</sup>

#### *The violent way to monoculture*

We don't know why they needed to use force to get us off the land, despite knowing that we own it. It fills us with worry, but we do know that it all has to do with the major projects that they plan for our region; for example, monocultures of palm for oil, the extraction of arracacho<sup>9</sup> (mocou mocou) from the Lower and Middle Atrato basins, mining in the Careperro hills and the Urra hydroelectric dam.

As far as palm is concerned, we've got Urapalma, Palmadó, Palmas and Palmas de Curvaradó, and there's La Tukeka, another palm oil company. When it comes to forestry, there's Maderas del Darién, a large company that's wanted to extract timber from the area. And in terms of mining, I can't remember the exact name of the company, I don't know if it's Baringo...no, I don't remember.

That's why they want to get us off our land, and it's shocking to think that they never consulted our communities about these things. They took their decisions behind our backs and everything they've done has been done by force, by violence.

In the case of palm, the growers never came to the communities to consult us about their operations, about the planting of the trees, and when we found out that they were planting palm, we started to protest about the use of our land because it's not for planting of monocultures like that. More recently the growers tried to make approaches to the communities, but they've already planted their crops and so we just kept saying that we wouldn't talk to any of them. We know that the state is behind it all, so it should be the state that talks to them. Similarly, we were never consulted

5 Metal sheets used for roofing. 6 Shacks made out of plastic sheeting. 7 Project designed to protect the civil population and apply the humanitarian principal of distinction. The first proposal was for the Community of Life and Dignity in Cacarica (Chocó) in 2001 then the communities of Dabeiba (Antioquia), Curvaradó y Jiguamiandó (Chocó) and the Civil Community of Life and Peace in Ariari (Meta). In 2005, in the provisional measures of Curvaradó y Jiguamiandó communities, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ratified their importance in the protection of the civil population ([http://www.corteidh.or.cr/serieepdf/jiguCurva\\_se\\_01.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/serieepdf/jiguCurva_se_01.pdf)). 8 Law 70 of 1993, or the Negritudes Law recognises collective ownership of territories to black communities of the Pacific basin. 9 *Montrichardia arborescens*, a native

about the mining operations<sup>10</sup> either. It's being done behind the backs of the communities.

If all the projects they intend to implement go ahead, it will endanger the very existence of those communities. First and foremost, the rivers will dry up, the waters of the streams won't be sufficient and will become useless. The forests are being completely destroyed. The species that live there, both animals and plants, will be wiped out. So the communities will have no way of getting by, and in the end everyone will have to leave one way or another because the land won't be fit for anything. Our children will be in danger of being wiped out too, because they more than anyone suffer the consequences, the diseases. And if we talk about mining, that involves loads of chemicals. When so many chemicals get into the water and the air, we as humans become much more contaminated and we'll suffer a major epidemic.

#### *Resistance to defend what's ours*

We believe that the main aim of displacement is to separate the peasant farmer completely from his land. Why? To plant monocultures and the major projects that are planned for our territories. One of the ways they get us off our land is by not sending a teacher to the area. Our communities tire of knowing that their children are keen to learn and, because there's no teacher, the family has to leave to find a way to educate its children. Secondly, there's no health provision in the municipality to provide for the wellbeing of the communities. Thirdly, as well as there being no health provision, there's no municipal support through the Sisbén [social programme] to pay for treatment. The state has completely closed our access to overland and river routes. They've never wanted to help to reopen the river or the roads.

We see this as a strategy they are using to get us to abandon our land. But, despite all the methods the state has used, we, among the communities, have been clear that we will continue to resist. We continue to say: "We won't leave." Yes, because we believe it's ours, we're fighting for it

and we're defending it because we believe it's the only way we can survive.

What's happening in Jiguamiandó is known not only nationally but internationally. There are many organisations in many countries who know about it, and they are putting pressure on the state over their intentions as far as our communities are concerned. We believe in their support, in our organisations, in the process of education. We are preparing responsible people with the knowledge that this is our land, it's our own and that cannot be changed. It can't be sold or given away. We believe they are people who are prepared to die for their cause, who won't take a step back, but will always push forward, defending what is ancestrally ours.

#### *Educate them so they feel like landowners*

We think it will be our children who run our organisations in the future and that the more qualified people we have, learning more day by day, the easier it will be for the process to gather strength and to defend our land better against the palm companies.

We believe that if the process starts at school and forms a fundamental base, we can sensitise our children so that they feel a true right to be here from a young age. That way this area will never be deserted, devoid of people. We will remain here, defending our land.

The teachers who are working on this want the children to grow with a feeling of belonging, with the knowledge that they are the owners of all this. Because this land was not founded by the state. It was us, our ancestors who established it and left it to us as an inheritance, and there no reason to sell or abuse what was given to us. Rather it must be preserved. What's more, we know that the forest known as the Chocó Biogeográfico is one of the Earth's lungs, the planet's second lung, so it not only us who benefit from it, but all the countries who breathe the pure air of our Chocó.

One of the things we've been doing at the community level is ethnoeducation, teaching



ourselves, because we see that from the knowledge we have we can be educating our children with the understanding that this land is ours, that we can't sell what is not transferable, and that we must continue cultivating and defending it so that everyone can get up each morning and see all the species that have been here since times gone by. We see that education is the tool, the main way forward in continuing to defend our land. By using our own people as teachers – community teachers, we call them – we've been getting results from our ethnoeducation programme round here, getting them to be responsible for educating our children in this vital topic. The teachers in our communities stay here, they are permanent members of the community. No matter how violent the situation gets, they'll never go far from the community.

These teachers need the support of the communities to be able to continue with the work and in time they can become licensed teachers. With the help of some of the organisations that support us, we've tried to get them places at university so that they too can continue training and be recognised as teachers later on by the municipality.

The standard of education in state-funded education has been terrible. If they send teachers they give them a contract of perhaps two months and sometimes, often, they leave. The contract isn't renewed, or sometimes they send a different teacher instead. We believe that the only alternative for our children is to learn with our community teachers. At the moment we've got six voluntary, community teachers who have taken responsibility for the education of around 150 children of school age, from grade zero to grade five. This is a large community, and that's why we've been worried: we believe that our children deserve to be educated, to have the opportunity to progress as much as the children of the president or anyone else who has money. They have an equal right to education.

We've opened an educational college, let's call it, so that older people can also continue their education, learning about how to defend


our land. The plan is that those who graduate there can go to a community and then be guides and take the reins as university-qualified teachers of high schools in our communities.

At the moment the schools don't have enough material for the teachers to prepare their classes. What's more they don't really look like schools because the mayors of the municipalities haven't been able to support us in building classrooms where our children can get a better education. They're things we've done ourselves, with our own efforts. There are even some schools in the open air, because we haven't had the resources to create proper schools.

### *The state turns a deaf ear*

Many delegations have been set up, not only at the municipal level but in Bogotá itself, to talk to the vice-president, the interior ministry and all that lot. But as things stand the state has turned a deaf ear, as if it was unaware of everything that was happening to our communities, as if for them, we didn't exist. We know they do all this because they know they need our land and, one way or another, they want us to abandon it. You go to the offices of the municipality and often the mayors pay no attention to you. Other times, when the vehicles arrive from the communities, they say they don't have a budget to help them. But we know that the municipalities get a budget, both for education and for health, for each community that falls under them.

We think that over time what may happen is that the municipalities will abandon us completely. They won't pay us any attention, our communities will become completely forgotten by the municipalities. We belong to them. But being part of the municipalities doesn't mean to say that they support us in our needs as communities. We persist in our plan to defend [our land], to continue the ethnoeducation programme with our communities, because that's for the better of all communities. Even if the municipality doesn't support us!



*Why would they do that to us peasant farmers, who've always been here, been the owners of all this land? And who, more than being owners, have a collective title that includes the entire territory?*





## Carlos\*

AGE	BACKGROUND	DETAILS
26 years old.	Peasant farmer.	Initially displaced within the region of the Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó rivers and then to Medellín.

### *I had to flee*

My life before being displaced was very peaceful. I lived on my farm, grew subsistence crops, and had my cows, pigs and a normal life with two children that are still with me, thanks to God. Then the conflict appeared in my hamlet and displaced me. Since then my life has changed a lot both economically and emotionally. The most worrisome thing is that there is no stability anymore. It's been 10 years since my displacement in 1997, and, despite all the laws and decrees that have been handed down, the problem of displacement has not been given an integral treatment as called for by law. That has meant that we've had to live in cities, in municipalities and on the slopes of urban areas with the uncertainty that at any time we can be run roughshod over and massacred. Until 2001, I resisted in the countryside, and I only fled within my region.

In 2001, I left the settlement of Jiguamiandó for the municipality of Carmen del Atrato (Chocó). The conflict was very close and I stayed there for only two months before I was taken by the Diocese of Quibdó to Medellín. I stayed there for three years and then had to flee again for security reasons. I'm not going to reveal where I am now because we are in the midst of a conflict that hasn't been treated with much care and has made us lose confidence.

### *Displaced for teaching people*

You can't even mention the leadership role that you had anymore. While in the past, you could do that work without fear, today you're afraid to say: "I am a leader of the community and I work for such and such." For me, what I've lived through is very troubling as is the fact that nobody pays attention to what is happening in Colombia. It's very troubling that every day there is more displacement and, with it, more poverty, misery, conflict and war.

I think its very important that people know the reality of what we're going through, the displacement situation. I've experienced arbitrary arrest for things that I've never done, and I've been put in a cell for 24 hours just for being a displaced person, for demanding my basic rights as a person: rights which have been granted to us as a special sector of the population. The law says we have those rights, but, in truth, the law is never complied with.

I've participated in two juntas de acción comunal (community action committees): In the first, I was in charge of finances: in the other, I was vice president. I organized people to demand their fundamental social rights: access to roads and rivers and all that. Because of that work, the persecution against me increased and forced me to flee. I also participated in community sports

committees. Some of the things I enjoy the most are sports, recreation and culture and, if they related to my people, I enjoy them even more. That's why I was displaced: for teaching people what to do and how to demand their rights. It's caused me a lot of suffering.

My work has always been for the community, and, if I work for the community, I'm obviously working for myself and my family. I work a lot with issues of the countryside, in environmental and forestry issues. I've worked a lot in forestry, but at the same time, in reforesting what we've cut down.

Because I've wanted to do reforestation in my own way and not how the laws says it should be done, because I've spoken with the community about how one should take the initiative to preserve the environment and not leave it to others or the government to tell them how to do it, I've also been persecuted. I've been persecuted politically.

### *We all knew and cared for each other*

As a result of all that happened, I didn't have the opportunity to study much. Because of the conflict, I lost two twin girls that were only one month old. It is one of things that pains me most. They died because I couldn't get – even having the money – a pill because the road out of town was blocked by the paramilitaries. After having lived very well, that was the beginning of my tragedy. I grew up in the banana zone of Urabá. That had been my life story. My life and that of my family before our displacement was marvellous and very peaceful. We didn't worry about anything, neither economically nor socially, because we lived within a strong social fabric in which everybody knew each other.

We all knew each other and we all cared for each other. If someone got sick, it was as if the entire community had gotten sick. Today, it's not the same: my neighbour doesn't care if I get sick. But when you live in a community, in your homeland, things are very different and make life much more agreeable. For me the situation is very worrisome. It's been a change that only one whose been through it can even imagine.



### *Crammed in the cities*

We travelled by rivers and by land. We used the beasts that everyone had and the boats, with both community and private motors. That's how things have been in our society until now. Despite the mud and the water, I think it's much safer and more relaxing to travel by horseback or using an outboard motor on the rivers than to travel by bus or plane. In a city, when you travel by car, you crash into a motorcycle when you least expect to. There can always be difficulties in doing things that you're not used to doing.

Our houses, you can't say they were comfortable houses like those that you see here. But, for us, they were much better than any building or any country house that you see in the city. If they were humble houses, they were very well built. We always made our houses from the finest wood of our region, according to the size, needs and tastes of each family. They weren't houses like those that you see in the cities of six by 12 meters. No, at least mine was a house of 10 by 16 meters. My family was very small, but my neighbour would come, another person would come, and they would have a place to lie down and sleep or talk. We weren't all crammed in like we are in the cities.

I would like to live in the countryside and in my community again and have my own food, my chickens and my pigs. No one there had to buy an egg, milk, water, or meat, because we produced it. We had every everything you needed to live. In the cities, it's different. Here you have to find water. You have everything unnecessary: streets and pedestrian bridges.

### *The toughest part: trying to adapt*

In the first displacement of 1997, my family – my brothers, my in-laws and everyone – went to a settlement. The only person who stayed in the region working – because I said I wasn't going to abandon what was mine for anything – was me. I moved from hamlet to hamlet until 2001. Then, because of the conflict, I also had to leave

the region. That was the beginning for me of all the blows and bitterness you feel as a result of displacement. It's then that you realize how life can change course from one minute to the next, change in ways that you never expected.

The damage it causes is psychological. When you arrive in the cities, the first thing you find is that, if you don't have money to pay rent, you end up sleeping in the street. In the countryside, in your homeland, it's not like that: If some natural disaster damages my house, my neighbour will take me in. In the cities that doesn't happen. You appear on the street as a stranger, a criminal, as what is known in Colombia today as a "terrorist." No one knows why you came. No one understands that you came because you were forced to, because it was the only way of saving your life.

That's where the first blows begin, the changes: You want to drink a glass of water, and the first thing you have to consider is if you have 1,000 pesos. If not, then you can't have your glass of water. And you children get sick because it's not the same living surrounded by clean air as living surrounded by contaminated air, because the cities are much more contaminated than the countryside. And that's where the toughest part begins: trying to adapt.

My life has changed a lot. The first thing in the cities is finding a job in something you've never done before. Building with wood is super easy for me, but building with concrete – which is what they use here – is more difficult and complicated. And as soon as they find out that you are a displaced person, no one wants to give you even a day of work. It's very worrisome.

When you arrive here, you see television programs showing that supposedly no one is indifferent to the displaced. But the reality you live is totally the opposite. When you are displaced, no one offers you their hand. They tell you: "the Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Solidarity Network) – they've changed the name to Acción Social (Social Action) – will help you. And you go there, sometimes on foot from where you live, and the first thing they do is make you

give a declaration requesting help, what they call emergency aid. And you find that the emergency consists of them telling you: “wait, we’ll call you.” You ask “when?” and they say “it takes 45 days to two months.” And sometimes three months go by and still the person hasn’t called you. You go back and “no, it’s that your name hasn’t appeared yet” or “your name has appeared but they still haven’t scheduled the delivery of aid.” First, that’s not emergency aid. Secondly, when they say, “your aid is ready,” you will get it or not. And if not: “Come back on such and such a day.” And they give you what is supposedly emergency aid that includes three months of rent at the price they say, without even considering the reality of how much you pay, but rather “we’re going to give you three months of rent at 250,000 or 300,000 pesos.” That means that if you pay rent, you won’t have enough for utilities, and, in any case, you’ll end up in the street or in the farthest corners of the city, which, as I said before, are on the slopes.

You come from where the conflict has gotten intense, and, as we all know, there is another armed conflict raging on the slopes of the city: there’s crime and drugs there, and the transportation is bad. And that’s where they give you housing. Instead of finding you a place in a neighbourhood where you can live peacefully, they send you to the worst neighbourhoods, where the insecurity is sometimes worse than in the countryside. Because if it’s true that in the campo you’re afraid of a snake, here you’re afraid someone will stab you to see if you have 100 pesos in your pocket...! So it’s very difficult for a displaced person to recuperate from their psychological state: you go out onto the street afraid because there’s lots of thieves, gangs, drug addicts. You’re afraid your son could get involved in those things and your daughter could end up prostituting herself because she can’t find anything else to do.

In the city, it’s more likely that they’ll give work to a woman than a man. As a man, you don’t find work and if you do find it, you don’t know how to do it. A person whose lived all his life

in the countryside doesn’t know how to mix cement with sand. By comparison, women get work cooking, washing clothes and ironing and the employer pays them what he wants. The women don’t get social security for health problems or anything else. But they get paid! So it’s a change: the men end up spending more time with their kids than the women. A man ends up practically changing from a man to a woman, because he has to take care of the family and do the things a housewife does.

For us, it’s very worrisome and, as all our lives we’ve worked as leaders, we get involved in groups, invite other displaced people – “let’s organize” – because that’s the only way to demand our rights: to demand that they give us better aid and offer a better way of handling it; that they understand that our level of insecurity is very high... Sometimes we can’t even live in a neighbourhood for two or three months. We have to move and we don’t have the finances to be constantly moving from here to there. Many leaders are in jail; many of them have been killed simply for demanding their rights.

#### *The state sponsored that expulsion*

After everything that’s happened and after having accused one group, I’ve come to realize that the most responsible party is the state. Because the state passes laws but doesn’t enforce them. I blame the state for the whole situation that has forced us to displace because if it’s clear that one group has forced us from our region for one or another political reason, you see, after you’ve been displaced, the megaprojects on television. In the region where you lived, there is now African palm. They are building hydroelectric plants; they are exploiting the region’s mines.

Today the government is bringing out the ley de tierras (law of lands), which says that whoever has been in a place for five years has right to that land. And the person, who for reasons of the conflict and the state itself had to abandon the land? You deduce from that that “this didn’t

happen because of one group or another. It was the state itself that sponsored the expulsion, that generated the conflict in the zone.” If I understand it well, the law before covered 10 years. So no one could use the land of the displaced population. But what we see now is that the new ley de tierras (law of lands) covers five years. In other words, after being gone from our lands for five years, we lose everything. Let’s review: I’ve been displaced from 1997 to 2006, or nine years, more or less

The new law removes all our rights to the places they forcibly expelled us from. Those groups, especially the paramilitaries, let themselves be used by the government. They displaced people from their lands. Now they have their own megaprojects and a law called Justicia y Paz (Peace and Justice) that they’re negotiating. No one takes responsibility for all the lands and goods that we lost. No one is blamed, because if you know that you were displaced by the paramilitaries, or you if you denounce having been displaced by the guerrillas, or whoever else, it’s that group that has to take responsibility, not the state.

If you look at our area – after we were displaced – with the African palm and the hydroelectric plants, you see the forces of the Colombian state: the army, the police, and every type of armed control that the state has. So you say to yourself: “They displaced me from there, but they build a hydroelectric plant there and grew such-and-such a product and they’re being protected by the army. You can’t tell me that it was only the paramilitaries’ fault or was it the...”

#### *What happened with the lands?*

I think it’s just a state strategy. Now they make us think that they are negotiating. But they are just harvesting what they sowed: the state planted them so they would displace us and build their megaprojects. Now, the leaders – those that head those groups and the governments, in this case the present governments – are each taking their piece of the pie and keep everything they took from us by force, from us

the poor of Colombia who have always worked ... Why didn’t they just buy the lands from us or tell us what lands they wanted!

No one talks about that. They talk about how you are displaced and how everyone will help you. But no one says: “Look, on that land, from where so many families were displaced, there’s this megaproject and those people were displaced by the paramilitaries or by the guerrillas.” For example, my land is now planted with palm (backed) by international agencies, especially the gringos. You say: “Fine, what happened here? The gringos are supposedly the only ones assisting the peace process in Colombia! But on the land from where people were displaced, instead of helping us to return, they are growing crops for export.

You say: “I’ll struggle to return. I want to return to my land; my land has value.” They say: “You can return.” But when you return to your land, they assign a value to the land that is what it is worth now and not what it was worth before. In my case, it’s 80 hectares of African palm. With what am I going to pay the difference, in other words, what are called the *mejoras* (improvements)<sup>1</sup>? That’s where I say that this “was a trick by the state.” In other words, my land has been lost because the state doesn’t want to do anything about the problem. The state protects the land, the state fought for the land and has people there watching over it. And how am I going to recover it? If it was in the hands of the paramilitaries or some group involved in the conflict or some specific community, I’d say: “The state will have to recover it (for me).” But if it’s the very state that has the land, it’s unlikely it will give the land back to me, because that where it’s economic interests lie.

What I had before is no more. The conflict and the state itself has left me broke: I don’t have anything! What am I going to do, how do I start from zero, where? Then they propose to relocate the dislocated without even returning to you the value of what you had when you were displaced; they don’t take into account the time:

<sup>1</sup> Refers to work that the person possessing the land has carried out, whether that be in construction or crops.

seven, eight, nine years that some of us have been displaced. Where you don't have economic stability, or a salary or anything. Lot's of times you have to beg just to be able to bring some bread back home. That's very sad for someone!

I want my testimony to be taken into account, for someone to begin an investigation. What is happening? What happened with those lands? How can they be recovered? Or is it that they won't even return to you what your lands were worth and the time that you lost during your displacement. It's not the displaced person that made money, but he who displaced him. It's something that has to be carefully considered. Though the state has always wanted it to be known that it is not a direct displacer, in my opinion it is the most direct.

#### *That the truth be known*

The state says that it hasn't been a displacer, that it has nothing to do with that, that the conflict is of the paramilitaries and the guerrillas, and not the state. But the bombings carried out in the zone haven't been carried out by the guerrillas or the paramilitaries: it's the state that has bombed the zone and given the orders and expelled the people. Certain things have to be considered that have not been considered by researchers and others who say they want to help, who want to bring to light what's happening in Colombia and achieve peace.

The principle actors in generating all the displacement – affecting 95-96% of the population that is now displaced – have been the paramilitaries.<sup>2</sup> And now they are supposedly sitting down to negotiate, which is to share what they have stolen, share what they have taken up to now. And they want people to believe that they are making peace, when the reality is different. You see those men in places and areas of the cities. Supposedly, the Peace Commissioner says that there are only two groups of paramilitaries left to demobilize.<sup>3</sup> And in the areas where they've already demobilized, they're still protecting their

interests and sharing amongst each other what they've taken from the population, from the Colombian people.

As far as the Justice and Peace Law and reinsertion, I think that they made the majority of Colombian people believe that the paramilitaries were a group that was very separate from the state. But for us who've experienced displacement in the different hamlets and departments, it's apparent that those are only words, that in truth they are the same thing. It's a law of impunity through which the paramilitaries are becoming legalized. And with respect to what you had or who displaced you, nobody tells you anything. The government says, "No, it's the paramilitaries," but the paramilitaries don't accept the charges. And that's not what justice demands, nor what the people who know who did it...

I demand, in the first instance, that the truth be known about what happened and why we were displaced; about what was really behind all this. Secondly, that both the material and intellectual author of this be punished, because that's something that you don't understand: Today, with this law, there is no material or intellectual author. It's like if I acknowledge that I'm displaced, then I'm displaced. And if I don't acknowledge that I'm displaced, then I'm not. That's what these men do who are negotiating: "We accept such-and-such charges or we don't accept them." If they don't accept them, there is no prosecutor or anyone else who says differently. If they do accept them, the Fiscalía (Prosecutor General's Office) only has two months to investigate whether what they said was true or not.

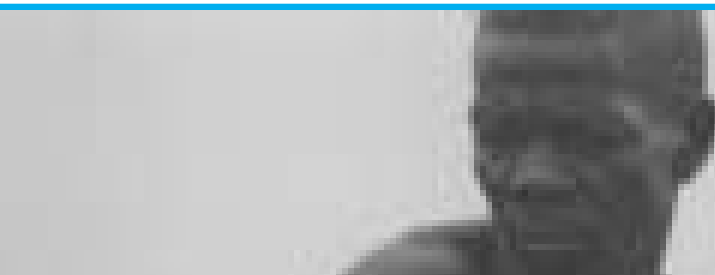
You see on television how with those plantings of palm have finished off the mountains and animals and dried up the rivers; there's no fish or anything else anymore. Supposedly they are passing laws to preserve all that. It pains me greatly that that is happening in my department, because it's no secret for anyone that the Chocó, with its nature and its forests, is not only the lung of Colombia as far as the environment and oxygen are concerned, but that it also supplies a lot of oxygen



to the world. Because we know that the trees absorb the contamination that industry produces.

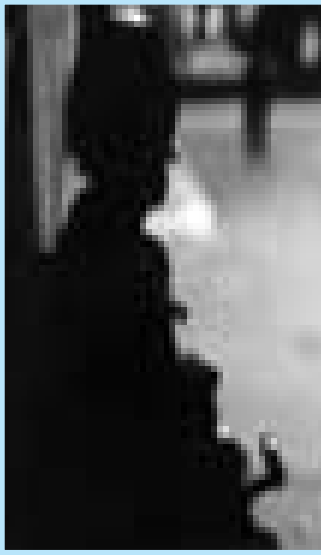
As an inhabitant of that zone, I'm very worried. I ask all national and international organizations to follow up on this and sit down with the state to define what has been happening, to make it understand, to tell it the truth and what we think. Hopefully, the state will listen to them, listen to what we think and what we want. And if we are really thinking in a better Colombia, let's reflect in a better way about it.

It's different being someone who doesn't suffer displacement than to be someone who does suffer it. It's something that only someone that's displaced can understand. I'm yet to overcome the blow of displacement. It's something you can never overcome. Colombia is a country where you can never believe or trust anyone. But you can't keep quiet. You have to say what happened, what is happening and express your thoughts about how it can be overcome.



*They displaced me from there, but they build a hydroelectric plant there and grew such-and-such a product and they're being protected by the army. You can't tell me that it was only the paramilitaries' fault.*





## Juan\*

### AGE

20 years old.

### DETAILS

Displaced from the Jiguamiandó river basin (Chocó) to Chigorodó (Antioquia). Returned to the collective territory of the afro-colombian community in the humanitarian zone of Pueblo Nuevo.

### *I liked to wash the horses*

The life that I remember from my first conscious thoughts was very lovely, very beautiful. I lived together with my parents and the rest of the family. I had freedom to go where I wanted and play with my companions. My father was a very good man; I liked the fact that he was my father, even though he isn't with me anymore.

I studied. We had a farm an hour from town. On weekends I would go there with my siblings to feed the various kinds of animals. On Sunday afternoons, I would return to the town so I could go back to school on Monday. I was a very good student and the teachers spoke highly of me to my parents. I was a dedicated child; I studied hard. But I also liked to go on trips with my friends. We would climb hills, ride horses and eat mangoes and other fruits. At the end of the week, we would return again to the farm to feed the animals.

We had different kinds of animals: cattle, horses, pigs, dogs, chickens, and cats. I mostly fed the horses, because I really liked to ride them. My siblings took care of the other animals. I liked to wash the horses with good soap and a brush, so they were kept clean. At that time, I was 8 years old. I was very little, but I liked to ride horses. My other siblings didn't like to ride. That's why it was me who did those chores, though I sometimes helped with the other animals.

I had the liberty to go wherever I wanted because I was a very respectful boy. I liked to help my companions and the elderly; I've always believed that that's the best way to be.

The houses in the town were made of zinc<sup>1</sup>, and those on plots of land were made from murrapo<sup>2</sup> and white leaf<sup>3</sup>: a leaf that you cut into strips for weaving. It's a leaf that doesn't last long. It rots quickly and must be continually replaced. We would put all the animals that we had in little stables so they weren't exposed to the air or to rainstorms at night.

My mom spent her time kneading flour to make bread and *cucas*<sup>4</sup>. My father liked to weed. He would teach us how to treat the animals and, when school let out, help us with our homework. That's why I was always a hard-working student.

We played ball and football and gave each other piggybacks. We made balls from clay or by filling tins full of dirt and heating them up. They were a bit heavy, but we didn't have our own balls, so that's what we used.

At school, I really liked helping my friends with their homework or planting the school's trees. I said that the trees had lots of uses, and I think I was right. I also liked – at least within my community – to help the elderly with their chores. I liked to help my companions and anyone else. Since I was a child I've always been

\* Name changed at interviewee's request. 1 Metallic sheets for roofs and coverings. 2 They use the trunk from the Açai Palm or murrapo (*Euterpe oleracea*) to construct fences and as columns for houses; they take palm hearts from the shoot. 3 *Calathea lutea* (Aubl) Schultes. 4 Cookies made of wheat flour and panela (sugarloaf).

very helpful to others. I liked helping people from my community.

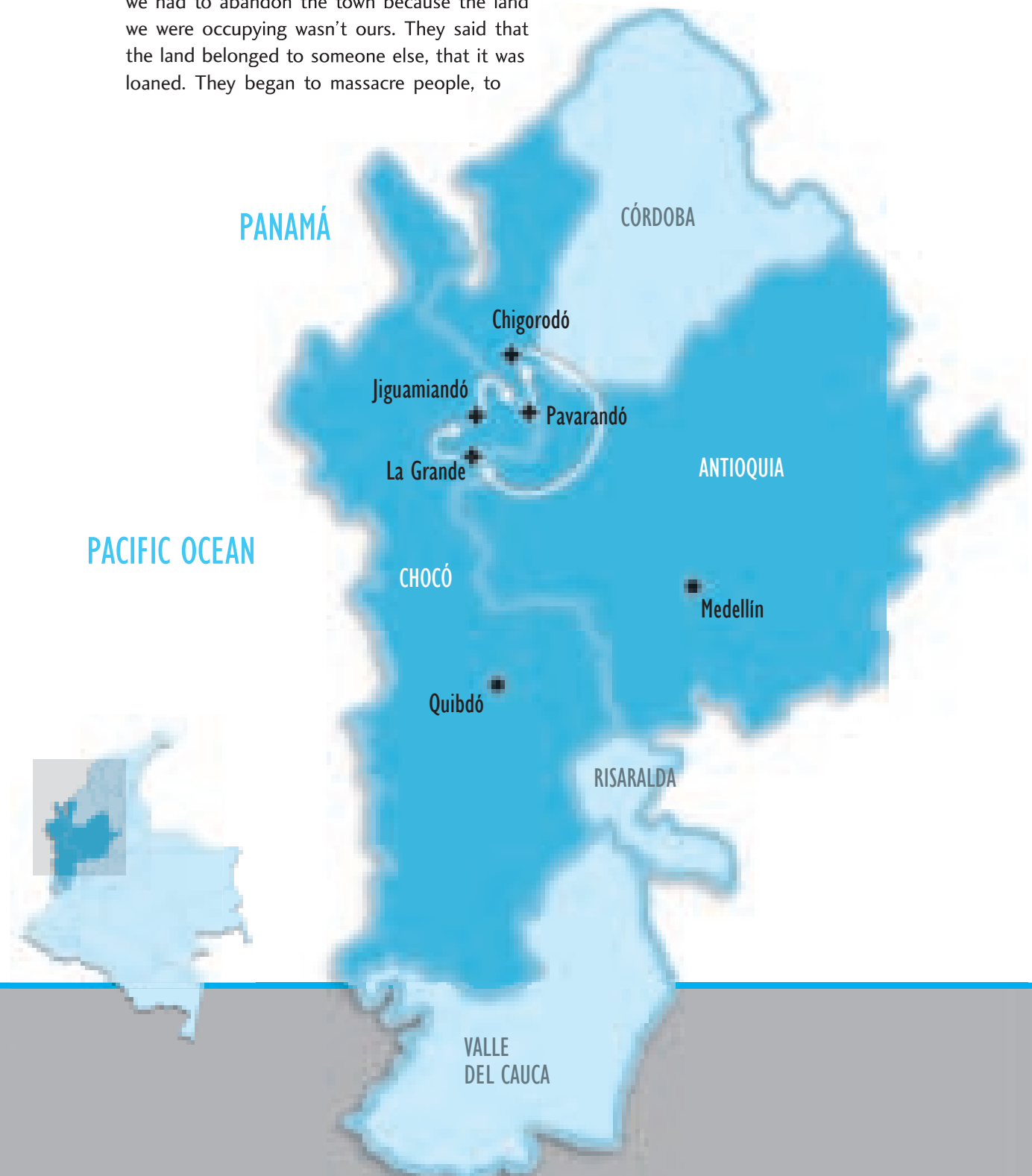
### *Fleeing from death*

I lived with my parents until I was 11. Then the violence appeared that separated us.

When that happened, my parents had already sent us to stay with my sister. It was April 12, 1997. That day men appeared in town, threatening people, saying that we had to leave, that we had to abandon the town because the land we were occupying wasn't ours. They said that the land belonged to someone else, that it was loaned. They began to massacre people, to

mistreat them, as if they were animals. There was no choice left for people but to flee. Helicopters appeared in the sky, shooting. We asked ourselves why all this was happening: we didn't have anything to do with the things that were going on. People fled running: fathers lost track of their children; children lost track of their fathers. Everyone had to fend for themselves, to flee death.

I was on the road. It took three hours to get to my sister's place. I was only around 15



minutes away, when I heard a terrific racket from the town. I wanted to return, but I said to myself: “no!”. I had never heard anything like it before. I was frightened, and I sped up to get to my sister’s. Then I heard it again. “Ay, God! – I thought – My God, help me! What will become of me?” Close to where I stood, the helicopters passed overhead. But they weren’t strafing there; they were strafing on the outskirts of town. People escaped. Children, old people and women hid in the jungle. He who was bathing had to flee in his underwear; he at home, with what ever he was wearing. No one had time to grab anything.

I could hear it all from my sister’s town. I ran into the jungle, running, fleeing. I hid, without knowing where to go, without having anything to eat...and the mosquitoes ate me up! I found a few hog plums<sup>5</sup>. That’s what I ate the first day. I thought I was going to die, because I got stomach cramps so bad I couldn’t even stand up...for around 15 minutes. Then it passed. I just cried and cried, because I...was lost in the jungle, alone. I couldn’t hear the people who fled into the jungle from the town nearby, nor from my town. I couldn’t hear anything at all.

I couldn’t stop crying, but what was I going to do? I lay down to sleep in the *bamba*<sup>6</sup> of a tree – that was my house – because I didn’t know where to go. I decided to stay there. There are some small farms before you get to the town, and before the farms, some fruit trees. How great is the Lord, that in that season there were still ripe fruits. I would go and pick them; that was my food, my sustenance. I would drink water from the creek and then return to my house – the *bamba* of a tree – and cry. I didn’t do anything but cry.

People fled towards the parish of Pavarandó. I was half way between my town and Pavarandó, lying down in the *bamba* of the tree, in my house – what I had designated as my house – when I heard some footsteps. It was my uncle and a little boy. My uncle could barely walk, but he was with a boy around 9 years old. The boy helped him walk. He took his hand, and helped him move along. When I saw my uncle, I embraced

him. I didn’t know what I was doing! I embraced him and I embraced the other companion too. I cried from happiness to not feel so alone!. Later, my uncle said that we should cross the creek. Then we took a right onto a path which took us to the highway that went to Pavarandó, to where the people had fled.

My uncle leaned with one hand on the shoulder of our little companion and leaned with the other hand on me, and we walked along, slowly, slowly. At around six in the afternoon we arrived in the parish of Pavarandó. The army tried to make us turn around because it was apparently very late and people weren’t allowed to pass through at that hour. We explained that it was too late to return and that we were already in town. How were we supposed to just turn around and go back? We said that we were just kids, that something could happen to us on the road that late. Finally, as if by miracle, they let us pass.

#### *My heart beat again*

When we arrived, we found people crying over us. Yes, thank God people had gotten out and arrived in this town where they were getting resettled. When I got there, when I saw my people, I went crazy with happiness! My heart began to beat again.

It was rough, but fortunately no one had died. We all made it alive to the parish of Pavarandó. There were many pregnant women there and women who had just had their deliveries and had had to leave, walking in that state.

On the road, we found lots of boots belonging to people who, out of fear, hadn’t even put their boots on. We found ripped shirts and lots of pants. People had fled practically nude. As I had been going to stay with my sister for three days, I had a bag with two sets of clothes. That’s all.

The most difficult part was there in Pavarandó. We stayed in the middle of a sports pitch. We threw ourselves down to rest, to ease our nerves, to come to grips with not being in our birthplace. We didn’t have anything to eat there

<sup>5</sup> Hog plum, common name in Colombian is Spanish Ciruela hobo, (*Spondias mombin* l). <sup>6</sup> The roots at the base of a big tree that form a kind of cave.

and nothing in which to sleep...Some kind-hearted people from the town gave us blankets, yuca, plantains...But you need lots and lots of housing for a crowd like that, not just two plantains and two blankets. No, that was enough for some people. But the rest – the majority – had to sleep there in the dirt.

People cried and cried. They would say: “My God! Why did this happen to us, we haven’t done anything wrong?” I was a child at the time. I understood that, no matter where it strikes, violence is a destructive, deadly thing that destroys your life, my life, and the life of any human being. So we stayed there. A week after we arrived, some people from the town of Pavarandó left for the municipality of Mutatá.<sup>7</sup> They spoke to some people there. Then some organizations came, spoke with us, and decided to help us with a bit of food and shelter. More than anything, they sent us blankets, mosquito netting, and stuff like that.

#### *We survived suffering great hunger*

Our goal was to return. But we also thought that, while fortunately we had all gotten out alive... what if things worked out worse this time? So we decided to wait a bit until things calmed down a bit. Also, they wouldn’t let us pass through the roadblock, because they said that if we returned, we might get killed. I don’t know who told us that – that we might get killed if we returned. But they said we should wait because everything was in chaos there. Things like that. After a long time, we were able to return.

We were displaced for three years. We spent three years living badly, because in Pavarandó, after we managed to get them to help us with a bit of food and shelter, they would give us food for just a month. Then the food would run out. Can you imagine a family of 15 kids, 11 kids, nine kids? What we got was very little. Behind it was a good heart, and we are grateful. But it wasn’t enough for really large families. The food would run out and it would be one, two months before they would bring us food again. People

were hungry the whole time. They couldn’t even go out and look for wood. In the town we asked for yuca and plantains. And people who owned houses would tell us to go back and gather it for ourselves. But we couldn’t go.

The provisions they gave us were intended to last a month, but on seeing that we couldn’t return, the people that owned houses there gave us plantains and yuca. Not being able to return, we decided that the provisions were for a month and we should distribute them. We had to eat a little at a time so the provisions would last for two or maybe more months until another shipment arrived. In that way, though with lots of hunger, we survived there in Pavarandó.

And being there in Pavarandó for around eight months, some members of the community – young people and adults – decided to go to the military base to get permission to return to the community. They (the soldiers) said that we could return but that we couldn’t stay in the town because the same thing might happen again if (the armed men) were around. So people went and brought things back: things for sleeping, plantains, yuca, beasts of burden. In my town, almost everyone had those animals, the beasts of burden. They went and they loaded up their donkeys and mules, loaded the mules full and brought lots of things back which they passed out to everyone, to all the other people there. The situation eased a bit, and we too returned to our town. We got an official permission from the military base to go as long as we didn’t stay. The majority of people returned: In one family, a brother and nephew returned; in another, the first cousin, the uncle, the son and the grandson. In that way, they retrieved many things.

My older brother and uncle went from my family. They got the beasts of burden from my father’s farm and loaded them up, especially with plantains; they didn’t bring things like cabinets and furniture. All that, no, because our goal was to return. More than anything, people got the permissions so they could look for food, some clothes and things to sleep in.

### *I felt that my life had ended*

In Pavarandó, we lasted nine months suffering hunger, real hunger. And then the situation eased up because we could go and look for food on our land, or sometimes look closer by. Once, in the middle of the road, we ran into some men. I was on that trip, because I told my mom that I wanted to go and look for my horse, a horse that I nicknamed Lightning, for his speed, and really liked. We ran into those men and I said to myself: "My God! Is my luck that terrible that when I decide to return, we run into the same people that made us flee?"

Well, yes. They seized us, mistreated us, insulted us. They kicked people. They assassinated them. I cried and one of the men shouted at me to shut up and stop yelling. Out of pure fear, I fell silent, trembling, sweating...I hugged my brother. They seized people and assassinated them. They told us we had to go back from where we came...

I felt like my life had come to an end. It had come to an end because they were abusing people. I thought that they were going to assassinate us all. But no: they assassinated exactly nine people. There were 23 of us who set out and nine were killed. Some were killed with wooden clubs cut from trees; others were set on fire ... It was, in other words, the worst death you could deal. It was really, really bad for me. When we got back to Pavarandó, people were crying. We got together and agreed to go the municipality of Chigorodó<sup>8</sup>. We talked with some organizations there, who helped us with transportation. We were in Pavarandó for a year. From there we moved to Chigorodó in 1998. For some, it was better there; for others it was worse. At least some people had families in Chigorodó that could help them find work on the banana plantations.

### *After that I did poorly*

In Chigorodó we got assistance: People working on the banana plantations contributed money and food and helped people who didn't

have anything or didn't have that kind of job. For some the situation was easy; for others it was tough; I worked selling fritters and *bolis*<sup>9</sup> I sold lots of things.

Though for some the change was a good, for others it was bad because it was a move from the countryside to a 'municipality',<sup>10</sup> where the atmosphere was completely different, where absolutely everything was different. For some the change had to be very difficult. Yea, its tough getting used to things you're not used to: withstanding hunger, sleeping in the open air... No, no, no, I don't want to get used to that bad life that we lived! We thought that we would go to Chigorodó and that maybe things would calm down a bit. We decided to go there and then do a loop, going back to La Grande – a town on the banks of the Atrato –before returning home. We went to Chigorodó and ended up staying there for a long time. We lived badly. I began studying at a school there, and, right away, I began doing poorly because I would sit down to study and I couldn't but think of all that had happened and what would happen. My grades fell.

In 1999, we went to the parish of La Grande. There was work there, work quite similar to what we did on our own lands: fishing, growing plantains, growing rice... just like we did at home.

Our goal was to get closer and closer, and eventually return home. And that's what we did: get closer. We arrived in La Grande. There people helped us out: We had what we needed for sleeping, and they gave us fishing nets and *champas* (canoes)... Many people from my community have relatives there. Our confidence grew, but we couldn't forget what had happened, what was happening to us. To survive better, we began to fish and plant.

### *With minds focused on the earth*

We lost a year in that community. In 2000, we decided to return to our lands. Some of us were afraid that "ay, My God! hopefully, the same thing won't happen!" But people still have

<sup>8</sup> In Antioquia. <sup>9</sup> Home made frozen refreshments in tubular plastic bags, very popular among children.

<sup>10</sup> Refers to a town.

their minds focussed on the earth. We had to return to what was our life, our bread. Away from our land, we couldn't live; our goal was to return.

After all that time, we found the town in ruins, with the houses damaged. Whatever we had left behind, they had taken. It was a disaster! A disaster. We decided to clear out all the weeds. We set ourselves up in the less damaged houses and started there. We were still getting food assistance, but, in spite of it all, we suffered a calamity of hunger.

We had returned, but there were no plantains, no yuca, no ñame<sup>11</sup>, yams, Nothing! We had to scour the hills for food. Since plantains don't ruin quickly, we would scour the hills for green plantains and eat that. Holy God! I would try to eat those plantains and I wouldn't be able to, I wouldn't be able to get it down, but...green! green!

The river was clogged with sediment on a stretch of roughly eight kilometres from the mouth upriver. People nearly cried: the river disappearing! Still we concentrated on our return.

Seeing that nothing remained of what we'd left behind, we told ourselves that the most important thing was to be alive and back home. What more did we want? Though there was nothing left, we were back. Then we decided to start planting our food again. While we were waiting for the crops to grow, we suffered hunger. Then we harvested plantains, rice, and corn – because the fastest harvest is from corn and a rice we call *ligerito* (fast), which takes about a month, 15 days. We began to eat and our hunger eased a bit.

*Ay, I couldn't bear to look at them!*

When we returned we didn't hear any helicopter or planes overhead. No armed group came into town. We told ourselves: "things are finally a bit more relaxed." We had the impression that maybe they [the paramilitaries] would return, but, in any case, we were happy to have returned, to be back home.

We returned in 2000 and 2001. On September 12, 2001, they [the paramilitaries]

reappeared; they reappeared killing people. Ay, Holy God! I don't want to remember it! When I remember what I saw, I can't stand the pain in my head, My God!

First the army came, behind them the AUC. They were mixed together, mixed...They arrived and identified themselves: "We are the National Army" and then the other group came: "We are the Self-Defence Forces," insulting people and mistreating them..."Can you imagine: for someone who is not used to these things, to see something like that? We thought that they were going to finish us off! As they said that they were going to kill everyone, down to the smallest child, we said to ourselves. "So they will kill us again."

Some people ran for their lives, throwing themselves into the river or fleeing into the jungle...but most people stayed in town. It was mostly the young people who fled, because they were the targets of the armed group. Because they wanted to assassinate young people or take them away, kidnap them...! They summoned people saying: "Why did you return to our land? This is ours, not yours... you have to leave immediately, unless you want us to kill you all and not leave a single sole to even tell your story."

I was next to my mother, who had also broken down in tears. I didn't even look at them, I didn't look at them because I knew that if I looked at them...Ay, I couldn't even look at them!

I felt like life...I felt that my soul had left my body, that it was no longer inside me. Because I would move and I would feel empty. I couldn't feel, I couldn't feel what was inside me...People ran. They summoned those that remained to say that everyone had to abandon town, that the land was there's, that we shouldn't have returned to get in the way, that they had warned us. We had to clear out immediately. If not, they would wipe us all out.

With that we realized that all that aggression against us, against the communities in the basin, had been for land, for our land, to take our land away. Because the land was very fertile,



suited for growing many things... so yes, all that hostility was to get our land.

### *We tossed a coin for our life*

In that attack, five people were assassinated. Sadly, they assassinated two of my brothers: my twin brother and my sister who was 28 and pregnant. And yes, sadly... three other young men. After they left, people went to look for those who had fled and hid. We found the dead. They had been stoned to death. They had put each person's head on a rock and smashed it with another rock. Ay, My God! I had never seen something so grim, so horrible! The dead were gathered up and buried. We decided that that though they had said they would kill us if we didn't leave, though we had suffered terror, we weren't going to abandon our land again: We would live or die. We tossed a coin for our life.

After the community took its decision, my life was a bit scary; I was scared but also satisfied, full of happiness. Scared, because if they came back they could kill us, and happy because we were back in our territory, where we had wanted to return.

The impact of all those aggressions against us has been really tough. It was tough to get used to things that you weren't brought up with, to see people murdered, to see things that you never imagined – much less as a child. It was tough to have to flee again, to see that we were missing people in the community, that everyone cried all the time, that we didn't live as we had before. In truth, it's been really hard. I can't figure it out because it's... it's the worst that can happen to a person, to a community!

I think those things are unforgettable. Though they're not always present, they're in your heart and your mind. It's not something you can just forget from one moment to the next; I think it's something you can never forget...Yea, I think you can never forget. Forget my brother, forget my sister, forget what we lived through and all those people who are no longer around...? No, no, no...!

Now I live with my mother. I live with her, because my father drowned. I feel very sad that he's not with me anymore.

In spite of everything, some institutions have helped us. They've cheered people up and insisted that we keep living, that we keep resisting. I think that if we had to abandon here again it would be really hard.

### *My life isn't worth anything anymore*

My life after all that we've lived through is – my life, to tell the truth, isn't worth anything anymore. They've taken my future, they've stolen it, destroyed it. Because of that, I haven't been able to continue studying. My life is a disaster: now even the smallest noise gives me a headache. My life has been completely destroyed.

I want to study, to try to recover some of the things I lost and do lots of good things, lots of good things for other people.

I think those people have black hearts and should pay for what they've done, that they should be punished. Yes, they deserve to be punished, to pay for what they've done. Because they aren't good people; they are bad, too bad to be living amongst others. They've destroyed the lives of innocent people, people who didn't have anything to do with them. So I think they should be punished, that they should pay for what they've done.

I don't think anything can be done to repair the damage, no matter what they do. How will they return my dead brothers to life? No matter what they do, life won't be like it was before; it won't be the same. What I mean is that our community has been marked forever. What happened is unforgettable. We'll never forget it, and it will always be on our minds.

I beg God that what happened to my community...that, God willing, it will never happen anywhere else: it's the worst thing that can happen to a person. I hope it doesn't happen to anyone else.

*People fled running: fathers lost track of their children; children lost track of their fathers. Everyone had to fend for themselves, to flee death.*





## James\*

### AGE

20 years old.

### BACKGROUND

Peasant farmer.

### DETAILS

He was displaced in 1997 from the Cacarica basin in Chocó to Turbo in Antioquia. He returned with his family in 2001 to set up the humanitarian zone of Nueva Vida.

### *The oldest of four siblings*

My childhood was really lovely. Lovely because, before I was displaced, I had the chance to form friendships with people from other villages, to amuse myself with my companions. I had the chance to study at primary school and to win people's affection. To listen and be listened to. Having this inclination, this patience, to make myself understood and understand others.

My childhood was centred around my parents, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles and my siblings, that whole family scene that you have, that surrounds you. The community was called La Virginia and the school, which was called María Montessori, was in the municipality of Río Sucio.

After we'd finished the fifth grade [of primary school], as there weren't enough teachers and the school wasn't good enough to continue to sixth grade and above, my parents talked to their relatives and they sent me to a municipality called Turbo, in Urabá, where I started sixth grade. It was a private school called the Liceo Interamericano, and I did my sixth, seventh and eighth grade there.

And that's where I was when the community returned to its collective land<sup>1</sup>. Circumstances meant that we didn't have the money to continue studying, so we returned and from then on studied at the Integral Cavida school.

We are four siblings, all boys. I'm the oldest. We're all still alive and for the time being we all live in the same house. I've got children and I had a partner, but circumstances in life meant that we separated. As well as the two children I had with that partner, I've another one. I've got two sons and a daughter, and they're the most important things in my life. Children mean family, they mean home, although I'm living with my partner. They are my reason to live. If life allows it, if God allows it, we'll have the understanding and the wisdom, and the means, to support them and give them an education so that they can have a future.

My dad's from the Lower Atrato, but my mom is lucky enough to come from Panama. They tell me their stories. How would you say? They started to go out...and their relationship... all over the place! These days they are a couple, we live happily and love each other a lot. We feel really proud to have them as parents.

### *Fighting for what you've got*

Problems in life meant that I couldn't finish my studies. I only made it to 11th grade, and after I'd abandoned my studies – which were the first goals I set and planned to fulfil – my dreams were to become an important lawyer or human

\* Name changed at the interviewee's request. 1 To guarantee the ancestral right of ownership of the land occupied by the Afro-colombian communities who practise traditional farming methods, the 1991 constitution (transitory article no.55) recognised their collective ownership of their traditional land in Chocó, Antioquia, Nariño, Valle del Cauca, Cauca and Risaralda. According to law 70 of 1993, the community advisers are the authority in the process of awards and they regulate social, political and economic matters in those areas.

rights defender, to defend people and struggle against this conflict and impunity.

I've suffered a lot. I'm part of a community that was displaced by the Colombian government, when they violated many of our rights. They violated the right of freedom of expression, the right to walk through one's own land, to be elected and to vote – rights that were set down to be fulfilled, but that end up being violated.

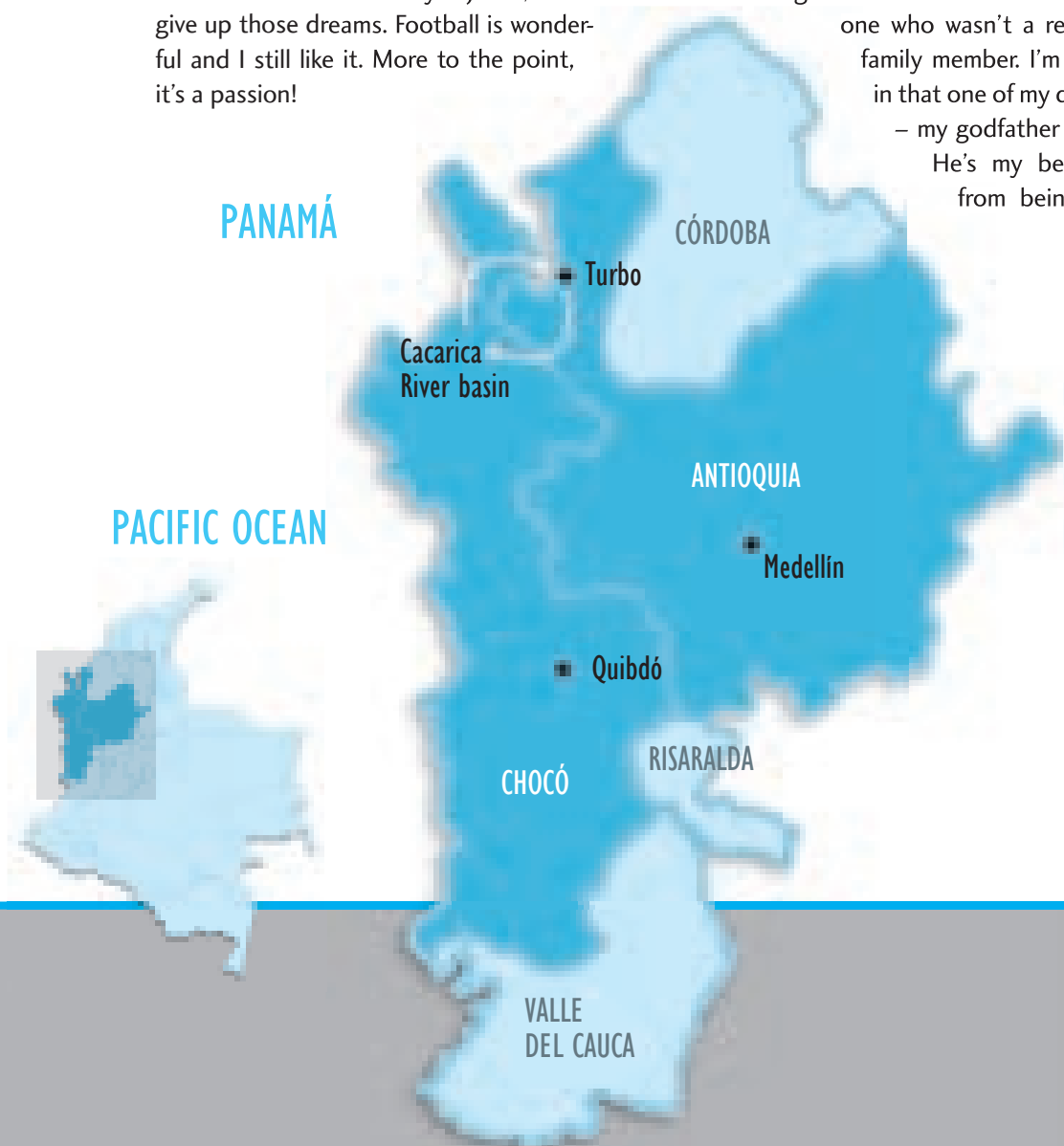
My desire to become a lawyer comes from the fact that I really enjoy talking to older people. Apart from that dialogue, there are also the problems that this country is living through at the moment. I've been part, for example, of a process of resistance, of collective land, and now there's nowhere to go. You have to fight for what you've got, for what you're living and, more than anything, to be a defender of human rights.

Originally I wanted to be a footballer. Those who saw me play said I played well. Unfortunately I had an accident and I wasn't the same afterwards. With so many injuries, I had to give up those dreams. Football is wonderful and I still like it. More to the point, it's a passion!

### *I'm a young adult*

In my adolescence, that period of development and growth – apart from the fact that my parents are my parents, there's also something very beautiful with them and that's the bond of friendship between us – I had a big chat with them and we continue to have them. We've come to realise that apart from being parents and children, we're good friends and they have lots of advice for us. They also offer that space so that you come to trust them, you get closer to them, you play with them. You don't do it like a child, but like a young person, a sibling, a partner or a friend. So sometimes my dad and I sat down and talked, and even had a beer. With mom, we played. My mom doesn't even feel like my mom, she feels more like a sister.

I'm not a quiet person. I like to ask lots of questions, and I like to get to know older people. I realised that if I got to know my parents, who are much older than me, they could give me good ideas about how to get know someone who wasn't a relative and not a family member. I'm also really lucky in that one of my dad's first cousins – my godfather – is just like me. He's my best friend. Apart from being my godfather



or my uncle, he's also something more beautiful to me – he's my friend. He's someone who, if he sees you doing something bad, he'll never congratulate you for it. He'll tell you off.

I'm good friends with the lads and the partygoers. I always have been. I'm a big partygoer. I really like parties and dancing, I like my beer, messing around with my mates, but I've never felt the need to talk to a lad of 17 or 18 in the same way as I'd talk to a man of 28, or even 40...It's a very different reality, which is not that challenging for many young people, but they don't manage it as easily as I've done and still do.

I'm not, and I don't feel, any different from other young people. I feel the same as the others, of course, with the difference that not all of them talk to older people as I enjoy doing. Not all older people confide in youngsters as they confide in me. I feel the same as them. Sometimes I bring a few adults together with my friends so they form a relationship.

I feel really proud – and not because it's been a challenge – but before I began to be friends with my parents, I thought that it was going to be hard for me. Because adults don't like to play with kids and, moreover, there are kids who are very excessive, they go over the top, and the older people, the adults, criticise this.

The older two of my brothers are similar in that sense. One is 17 and the other 19, and although we're not perfect examples – I couldn't say that – but we are lads who are well received by older people because we're easy to take on, to understand and to acknowledge. My youngest brother is a horror, he's a little horror. They even call him "the old boy" because he seems to be so old and the lad's, well, tiny. But I reckon he can manage to do it too.

#### *An adult helps you think*

I've tried more than anything to see that my friends can adapt to this idea, apart from trying with my brothers. Although it's difficult for some of them, I think they're capable of doing it,

they are doing it, because round here unity gives strength. You get three youngsters and two adults together, or four youngsters and one adult. Let's say we're going to do something bad. Well however much we're set on doing on it, the adult always knows where to draw the line, to say: "No, lads. Don't do that. Do things this way instead to create more harmony, more admiration." On the other hand, you get five youngsters together: "C'mon lads, let's go I don't know where" and then...trouble! But not with an adult. They help you to think first, and after you learn to do that, you like to think before you do things.

Many – those that knew me when I was little – say that I was terrible, that I got into rages, I sweated and I got angry. These days, my mates say that I've got the experience, or the mind of any 30 or 35-year-old. When they do something wrong I'm like their adviser, telling them that they've done this harm or that, that it was a very bad thing...With the mates I hang out with, that almost never happens because we discuss things and try to do things right. That's our motto.

#### *A big shock for me*

The community where I live is called Cavida<sup>2</sup>. It's committed to the defence of land and revealing the impunity in the legal processes involving deaths. In the case of the Cavida community, human rights are always ignored and the peasant farmer, the marginalised person, suffers the consequences. The community is committed to these revelations and to the punishment of those responsible so that justice can be done and human rights respected.

Cavida arose out of the forced displacement that took place in 1997, in an operation called Genesis commanded by General Rito Alejo del Río<sup>3</sup>. It came about because we were displaced in three directions: one group to Turbo and the others to Bahía Cupica and Bocas del Atrato.

It made an enormous impression on me. So much so that it made me want to be a

2 Comunidad de Autodeterminación Vida y Dignidad (Community of Self-determination, Life and Dignity), made up of displaced people and returnees from the Cacarcia basin. 3 The commander of the 17th brigade of the Colombian army between 1995 and 1997, he was removed by President Pastrana in 1999 under intense pressure from the US over the general's links with paramilitary groups. In 2004, the Fiscalía (The Prosecutor General's Office) closed its investigation for lack of evidence.

human rights defender. At that – I was a child, an adolescent – it made such an impact. Although you think like a child or an adolescent, it hits you really hard, because you've never heard such explosions, the bursts of machine gun fire, the bombardments. It was all pretty scary...the way the terror hits you: "You're leaving today!" or "You've got 12 hours to get out, or we kill you!" No matter how much of a child you are, you get scared when you see how they mistreat your siblings, uncles, family members, cousins, parents, how your parents feel mistreated, how they suffer.

It was really hard to see how my dad practically went mad. He suffered a terrible headache, because he had children. To see yourself losing everything, that you have to leave for somewhere you don't know, or if you do know the place, it's still not your home, you've got no way of working there, no profession. Thinking so much, seeing so many things – enduring hunger, without clothes – it made his head spin. You have to care for your family. But if you close your eyes for a moment, they'll kill them just to deprive you of what you love most. There is a territory you can traverse, where you can live and make a living. And they throw you off it, making you landless and depriving you of your basic rights. It's very difficult to deal with.

What hit me hardest at that moment was that my entire community fled to the heads of the rivers on the border with Panama. That's where we all went. And it was very hard to see the mothers each having to carry one or two children because there were a lot of small children and pregnant mothers. Many of my companions had to flee and take refuge in town or in Panama. My two grandfathers had to walk there, to run there. From Panama they were repatriated to Bahía Solano, where they lived on a farm called El Cacique. Having taken part in the resistance process and fought for the right to return, eventually they too were able to go home.

Once they got themselves organised, the people who went to Turbo, presented a five-point list of demands to the Colombian govern-

ment. After they'd presented their demands and after some of the demands had been met, they went back home in 2000. Their return took place in three stages, three phases. The first was February 28, 2000, the second in October of the same year and the third in the middle March in 2001. Once they were back, the people tried to get on with their lives.

### *It's easier to resist together*

We all decided to live in two settlements on two rivers, one called Perancho and the other called Peranchito. The communities that had been living on the banks of the Peranchito went to Peranchito, and those who'd been living in on the banks of the Perancho went to Perancho. There are 24 communities within the collective territory, which covers 103,024 hectares of land. Because of the war, we were living in two settlements, or humanitarian zones, that covered 12 hectares.

We decided to live in settlements because being together gives you strength. We realised that if each community had gone its own way, and each family with its original community, that our resistance would be weakened, and that they would displace us again to get us off the land and appropriate it. On other hand, as we were established in two humanitarian zones, or settlements, resistance was easier, much easier. It was stronger because we were all together. We lived together, made our proposals together and we presented them to the Colombian government, as it should be.

Another strategy or proposal was to establish ways of living in the context of the war. Some of the rules were: don't take part in hostile acts, don't divulge information to anyone, don't carry arms, and believe in the five principles of life that the community adopted – truth, liberty, justice, solidarity and fraternity. Those are the five points.

Those five principles or rules have helped us show the government and the other

armed groups that in order to live peacefully in a community of resistance we don't need arms. Identifying ourselves as the civil population also helped to win respect for us as such from the Farc, the paramilitaries and the army.

We presented our principles to the government, because we knew that it was the cause of the displacement. Who else were we going to present them to? We had to let them be known so all our work wouldn't be wasted and we gained respect. One of the things we asked for in our five-point list of demands was unarmed protection from the state. We asked for a permanent presence by the Defensoría (Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman), the Fiscalía (The Public Prosecutor's Office) and the Procuraduría (The Attorney General's Office), but as a result of the state's response, only the Defensoría established one. The Procuraduría came occasionally, maybe once or twice a year.

#### *We came here to harvest life*

Not long after we returned, there was a paramilitary incursion, so we came up with another

strategy. We realised that by asking for, by having a demarcated area for our houses, we could win greater respect. So that's why we decided to set up humanitarian zones. Our houses were part of a network, a network called the Network of Life, with wire fences to mark its boundary. We were there inside, and no one was allowed to come in. We thought that being inside there, the parties to the conflict would respect us and our space more and they wouldn't ride roughshod over us like they did before because it was a place exclusively for civilians, for the community.

In the community, in the two humanitarian zones there is a piece of land for 180 families and those families dedicated themselves to community work, to farming, working in the fields to grow their food, sowing corn – harvesting, sowing, watering. I dedicate myself to formative work in the community, to manual work, to farming.

Since we came back, we've been harvesting life. Yes, living again.



*No matter how much of a child you are, you get scared when you see how they mistreat your siblings, uncles, family members, cousins, parents, how your parents feel mistreated, how they suffer.*





In these 19 interviews, peasant farmers, Indians and Afro-Colombians relate the great drama of forced displacement which they themselves have lived. Some of them have been displaced more than once, and all have them have left behind children, brothers, dead and disappeared spouses in the journey of their flight. They were born in isolated regions, very distant from each other and, nonetheless, all the testimonies have something which identifies them: terror. To abandon one's regional roots, the labour accumulated during years, one's family and throw oneself into the abyss, is one of the most difficult torments and uncertainties that a human being can live through. Because in Colombia displacement is an exodus without a promised land and, in fact, without a guide. Though more than 3 million people have fled, the displaced person is a solitary person to whom terror has taught distrust in everyone.

One of the most striking features of the interviews – of which the country is unaware – is the simple fact that the persecuted are as such because at one time, or in some way, they were in disagreement with the regional or local bosses and ended up being accused as subversives. A woman from Palenque de San Basilio – a region near Cartagena de Indias, where a group of slaves took refuge in the XVIII century – affirms “[when] we realized that the politicians were cheating the people, they began to accuse us of being guerrillas. For me, the issue of our displacement was political, because, it was a policy that that old man used, where he was the person who controlled everyone.” It is not just being in disagreement that generates persecution: it's finding an alternative to the traditional order. Straying from the herd is a crime with a high price. The interviews make clear the distance that exists today between the real political regimen which rules in the regions from which peasant farmers are expelled and the democracy invoked as the basis of the institutional order.

The objective of this essay is none other than to bring to light the connections that exist between the agrarian question, the political structure and the displacement of the population. It thus seeks to highlight the current situation of displacement, within the context of a historic tendency that characterizes our society. The appearance and development of drug trafficking and, as we will see, paramilitarism has had a disastrous effect on the aspirations of the peasant farmer class for agrarian reform. The drug traffickers have conquered enormous territorial power by dispossessing peasant farmers and medium-sized owners

of their lands. That does not exclude the buying of large estates, illustrating, to some extent, agreements and even alliances between the old landed aristocracy and the new drug trafficking class. But the dispossession of lands was facilitated by terror, and that terror was achieved through massacres, disappearances, kidnappings, and executions. It was achieved, above all, by the effect of example, in other words, by the brutality and cruelty with which the operations were carried out.

The role played by the action or omission of the state in these monstrous events should also be emphasized: a role that does not end with displacement or dispossession. Rather, displacement fulfils another function, that of a political nature: the assassination and displacement of political enemies. Expressed in other way, terror doesn't have as its only objective the plundering of lands, but also regional political control, something demonstrated in today's so-called 'para-political process,' which has numerous politicians and high-level public employees of the current government criminally compromised. But there is more. The control of the political machine has still another objective: the control of the economic resources of the state. From that, administrative corruption emerges. Narco-paramilitarism is not content with the plunder of private lands, but extends beyond to the plunder of public assets.

To that general outline, it's worth adding that the combined factors considered are expressed with great clarity in what we agree to call violence and colonization. Violence can be defined as a form of coercion which appeals to terror to impose a determined social conduct, and colonization, as a process of occupation of lands – or territories – which lack title from the state and are, therefore, part of a reservoir of unclaimed national lands. Those two definitions of violence and colonization, ambiguous and rigid at the same time, can help those unfamiliar with such historical themes from falling into error.

This essay purposefully lacks statistics; it is a qualitative reflexion which aspires to a fuller understanding of processes that the official version tends to cover up. A decision was taken to gather testimonies of the displaced rather than to employ the traditional statistical study. We wanted to get to the bottom of the drama which millions of Colombians live without discrediting other analyses that are made in a more cold and distant manner. A word about the citations: they are not authoritative, but rather a bibliographical indication so the reader can amplify aspects of this work.

#### *Historical constant*

Violence is not a new phenomenon in the history of Colombia, but

a constant. To what is it due? I believe that, in the final analysis, to resistance and to the force with which people seek to conserve and reconstitute their primary social relationships in the face of overbearing political regimes. Violence always accompanies expansionism, call it mercantilism, economic liberalism, or globalization. The demographic catastrophe resulting from the Spanish colonization in America has been established with rigor (Konetze, 1971). In part, it was the product of a war of extermination aimed at domination – and from that the term of conquest that defines the era – and, in part, a religious mission of a cultural nature. The two weapons – the sword and the cross – served to displace the native population and seize their lands and riches, or subjugate them, exploit them, and, at best, make them tributaries of the Spanish Crown.

Economic liberalism – a regime which today determines our social organization – tends to subordinate other social relationships and other cultures, like the Indian, peasant farmer and black cultures. There are two ways of imposing that power: the ideological one – generally religious – and the armed, or political one. Both provoke resistance, but the resistance to armed domination tends to be insurrectional. Resistance causes the dominating forces to appeal to intimidation and terror: severe punishments, exclusion, assassinations, massacres and territorial expulsion. Violence and displacement of the population are historic phenomena that are mutually determining.

### *Civil wars*

During the XIX century, there were a dozen national civil wars and fifty local uprisings against central or regional power (Pardo, 2004). The great majority of these bloody conflicts had specific emblems (causes) justifying the confrontations. Nonetheless, the interests behind them were simple: centralism or federalism, lay or religious, free trade or protectionism. But the land and the forms of land ownership and distribution prevailed over these emblems. They had a particular significance in the mobilization of troops and the managing of war and its financing.

The political parties that appeared at the beginning of the XIX century, with the declaration of independence, were doctrinally consolidated in the middle of the century and continue today as ideological formations. In general, the governments were constituted as alliances of one party with a sector of its rival, but there were periods – like the Frente Nacional (National Front) [1958-1974] – in which a government grouping was agreed upon, which excluded all political opposition, and which cost, as is known, much blood and instability. The bipartidismo

(bi-party system) is and has been in Colombia a system which defends, above all, the political exclusivity of two parties and the exclusion of all tendencies or movements that could serve as rivals in the electoral field. It is, in reality, an exclusive hegemony which has generated as much governability as repression, as much stability as violence, and, even more administrative corruption and impunity. Administrative corruption of the Seventies was the breeding ground for the violence of drug trafficking, as it had been since time immemorial the breeding ground for contraband. And, in effect, drug trafficking began as a branch of contraband and had in its origins identical political protagonists: clientelism and high-level public employees.

In general, the armed conflicts during the entire XIX century began with a proclamation followed by a voluntary or forced recruitment; then came the armed confrontations and, finally, the peace accords, the amnesties, and, almost regularly, the writing of new political constitutions.

With respect to the displacement of the population, there are three aspects that have to be considered: the recruitment which required a suspension of economic life both for the soldiers – usually peasant farmers – and for the officers, usually landlords; the confiscation of goods from the defeated which was the culmination of the landlords' work; and, for the peasant farmers, the discharge of troops in remote regions where they tended to stay and reconstruct their lives. There was an intermediate situation: the flight of peasant farmers faced with a recruitment order or the presence of an enemy force.

The opening of many areas of colonization was a product of civil wars. The territorial occupation of unoccupied lands, as an effect of the demobilization of armies, incorporated many lands into the productive system. The coffee colonization that unfolded in the Central and Western mountain ranges, beginning in the middle of the XIX century, was truly significant in that sense. It stabilized during the first half of the following century. The movement of armed forces from one end of the country to the other meant not only displacement and, on occasion, the settling of troops, but also the identification of the population, both armed and civilian, with the concept of nation, as López Michelsen, a Liberal patriarch and president of the country from 1974 to 1978 (López Michelsen, 1974), has affirmed on repeated occasions. Mario Latorre, a notable political analyst and executor of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (National University of Colombia) wrote: "In these civil wars, history was created in fits and starts, national unity was woven rough and course, and the Colombian people were unified" (Pardo, 2004).

### *Conservative Hegemony and Liberal Republic*

Now, the new constitutions, when they permitted important changes in the economic regime, also implied, for that very reason, displacement of the population. The Constitution of Rionegro (of 1863) opened the country to free trade and the cultivation of tobacco, indigo and coffee. Extensive areas were 'civilized' by displacing the native population and replacing it with a new population in the west of Cundinamarca and Santander, along the basins of the Bogotá, Negro and Lebrija rivers (Rivas, 1972). In the war of 1885 – lost by Liberalism – General Gaitán Obeso mobilized thousands of peasant farmers in his armies from the Upper Magdalena to the Lower Magdalena, where, once the peace agreements and the decrees of amnesty and pardon were signed, the ex-combatants stayed in the region, working the land and starting their lives over. In the War of a Thousand Days [1899-1902], General Ospina stationed his army, of Antioquian origin, in the department of Córdoba; he appropriated a good portion of the best lands, and his soldiers colonized, with the subsequent displacement of Zenú and Embera Indians, the basins of the Sinú and San Jorge rivers (Sánchez y Aguilera, 2001).

The War of a Thousand Days, which involved the entire country in conflict and led to the loss of Panamá – a state of Colombia – initiated a period known as the Conservative Hegemony [1900-1930], given that the Liberal Party was defeated and totally excluded from political life. In the second decade of the new century, the coffee economy was consolidated, the country received from the United States an indemnity of 25 million dollars for the 'loss' of Panamá and international loans increased markedly. It was the so-called Danza de los Millones (Dance of the Millions) [1925-1929]. The investments in public works and an appreciable growth in manufacturing and the income of the state created a great demand for labour. The peasant farmers, weighed down by a servile regimen of labour, moved massively into the urban centres. Numerous associations and unions were created. (Ocampo, 1997). The emigration to the cities was a kind of displacement, originating in the great economic changes taking place. The majority of peasant farmers were contracted by the new industrial concerns. The unions soon demanded their rights.

The country had not taken note of the new direction when the crisis of the New York Stock Exchange [1929] erupted with serious consequences for Colombia. As investments were paralyzed, agricultural and livestock production collapsed, real estate slumped, and unemployment soared. The peasant farmers – now with union experience – returned to the countryside. The landlords had occupied the abandoned lands and the return of the of the workers brought

with its agrarian and social confrontations. Well remembered are the conflicts in the regions of Sumapaz, Tequendama, Chaparral. Between 1940 and 1970 those regions saw the harshest confrontations between Liberals and Conservatives. As a result of the agitation, both rural and urban, the Liberal Party won the elections in 1930 and initiated the so-called Liberal Republic [1930-1946], with a profound constitutional reform, which included legislation on the social function of property (Zalamea, 1999). In 1936, Congress passed Law 200, which, as a source of private property, gave primacy to direct labour on the land over the titles awarded up to that moment by the Spanish Crown and the Republican State. During that period, areas of new colonization were opened that absorbed peasant farmers rejected in other economic areas. Examples of these displacements that led to colonisations can be seen in the west of Cundinamarca, the north of Tolima, and the Magdalena Medio Santandereano (the Middle Magdalena part of Santander).

#### *Extractive Economy*

One of the most visible developments in the first quarter of the last century was that of the bananas, rubbers and extractive economics (petroleum). Banana cultivation opened extensive areas to foreign capital associated at first with national capital in the department of Magdalena. Colombia became one of the principle international producers of the fruit for the North American and German markets. The labour regimen imposed by the companies was abusive and brutal. The system of pay per item facilitated great abuses, leading to a no less aggressive stance by the unions. The clash is known as the massacre of the Banana Workers – recounted by García Márquez in *Cien Años de Soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude) – which begins the colonization of the foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and the Serranía of Perijá (Perijá Mountain Range).

Rubber began to be exploited in the southern jungles at the end of the previous century and experienced a big surge during the First World War (Anonymous, 1995). It amounted to a criminal exploitation of Indians who were subjected to slavery through a system of indebtedness. That system consisted of offering credits in merchandise that the natives then repaid in rubber. The difference between the prices of the merchandise offered and the rubber delivered was abysmal and led to a chronic indebtedness of the Indian from which he could almost never escape. The novel, *La Vorágine*, by José Eustacio Rivera details these atrocities. Entire communities were moved to the rubber plantations, far from their regions, never to return. Many of them, knowing the system, fled to other jungles, and families disintegrated, with the resulting ruin of the culture and traditional au-

thority. The denunciations of Cassemont (Anonymous, 1995), who was appointed by the British Parliament to investigate the situation of the rubber plantations in Putumayo department, revealed to the world the savagery that was being committed in the name of progress. Electrical conduction and the production of tires propelled the rubber plantations forward, as latex was the essential raw material of those processes.

Finally, industrial development brought to our jungles a new actor: the petroleum companies. In Catatumbo, on the border with Venezuela, large oil wells were handed over almost unconditionally to foreign companies for their exploitation. Their first victims were the Barí Indians, who lived in the Serranía de Perijá and in the basin of the Catatumbo River. The Colombian Petroleum Company began exploration and production in 1920 and forced the Indians from their territories by bloody means; at the same time, the demand for workers created neighbouring areas of peasant farmer colonization which intensified the expulsions (Villegas, 1968).

Finally, the *Hegemonía Conservadora* (Conservative Hegemony) created several prisons in the middle of the jungles intended to isolate prisoners and make their escape more difficult. Laws were passed against vagrancy, not only to imprison vagrants and common criminals, but also political opponents. Two prisons were very well known: that of Ituango in Antioquia and that of Acacías in Meta. With the passage of time, the escapes, the transfer of families, and the jailers' journeys stimulated the creation of routes of colonization that led to the occupation of the Nudo de Paramillo and the Serranía de la Macarena (the Macarena Mountain Range). These regions would be, during the decade of the eighties, the first headquarters of the general command of the paramilitaries and the second headquarters of the FARC guerrillas (Molano, 1989.)

### *The Fifties*

The hypothesis on the political violence of these years that will be defended here, can be formulated in the following manner:

In 1936, the Liberal Party managed to impose a series of institutional changes: an agrarian reform which, as indicated above, recognized the social function of property and, therefore, the supremacy of labour over land titles; tax on income; freedom of education and the right to strike (Tirado, 1971). The reaction of Liberal and Conservative landowners, national and foreign businessmen, the Catholic hierarchy, and the official armed corps was one of intransigence. Triumphant fascism in Europe inspired opposition to the reforms and opened diverse

fronts of battle to stop them. At the same time, the dispossessed peasant farmers, the unemployed workers and the middle class threatened by the recession sided with Liberalism, which despite popular support – or perhaps because of it – soon began to split little by little between a sector inclined towards an alliance with the Conservative Party, as a way of making the changes less radical, and a more popular sector, which sought to deepen the reforms (Tirado, 1995).

The moderate sector won the elections with Eduardo Santos, a millionaire businessman and owner of *El Tiempo* – the nation's most important newspaper – and decreed a pause – or rather a halt to the reforms. The other sector turned more radical, spurred by poverty, unemployment and repression. It was led by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán [1898-1948], who had a tremendous popular following. Santos ended up allying with the Conservative reaction. Gaitán, who led the reform movement, was assassinated on April 9, 1948 while on the threshold of power, leaving popular aspirations truncated and his movement leaderless. The Conservatives, who had been organizing since the end of the thirties, prepared from their position in the National Congress the atmosphere for an armed reaction that sought – and achieved – a reduction in the Liberal vote, physically eliminating it and inhibiting it through terror. The exemplary assassination, carried out by the armed faithful, sought to make the electoral base of the Liberals more conservative (Guzman *et al.*, 1966). The loyalty was rewarded with the land of the victims, both that of the dead and of the uprooted.

As can be deduced, the scheme of displacement through terror is not novel in the nation's history. The same mechanism is employed today as was employed during its first great wave 60 years ago. The government back then, which was Conservative, offered impunity to its followers, while the Catholic Church blessed their criminal actions. The landowners of both parties armed their peons to defend their property against the Liberal peasant farmers emboldened and enabled by Law 200 of 1936; the government promoted groups of paramilitary killers who ravaged the countryside and the small towns (Sánchez and Meertens, 1983). The result was macabre: 300,000 citizens were assassinated between 1948 and 1953.

In summary, the reforms that were begun, especially the agrarian reform, were halted by great violence, and their principle leaders were assassinated. It is reasonable to assume that if the number of assassinations was so high, the figure for forced displacement must have been simply horrific. The country never was the same after that period [1948-1965]. During the civil wars, thousands of citizens changed homes – and identities; many regions were colonized by persecuted people seeking a place to hide, and entire regions were depopulated only to



be repopulated by peasant farmers loyal to the Conservative governments [1946-1957]. Peasant farmers were expelled from the best lands so that agricultural and livestock companies could be established – sugar refineries in the Valle del Cauca, rice concerns in Tolima, ranching concerns in Urabá – linked to the national or international market and based on salaried labour (Guzmán *et al*, 1966).

There is copious empirical material and testimonies attesting to the fact that the violence of 1948 to 1965 – known by historiography as the Violence – was organized by the political leaderships and unfolded through the electoral machinery of both parties. The evidence affirms that the violence rapidly became a murderous crusade against “the opponent” and against anyone who seemed like one. Conservatism had the support of the Church, the police and a big proportion of the landlords and small landowners; Liberalism, the support of sectors of the provincial middle class, salaried workers and loyal peasant farmers. The Army intervened on the side of the Conservatives. Little by little, the “crusade” against Liberalism and the communists became a scorched-earth campaign. Entire populations were forced to flee in the face of the Conservative terror (Lleras Restrepo, 1955). Massacres, exemplary and macabre crimes, kidnappings and forced displacement were all used to drive the people from their lands and open up space for others, who were faithful to the victimizers, and who occupied the abandoned property. It’s enough to cite the events in the Western Mountain Range which, having been liberal, was “made Conservative” with terrific violence. The Llano (The Plains) were subject to Conservatizing forces in the same way. The Central Mountain Range – between Tolima and Valle – was “Liberalized” that way as well (Molano, 1996).

In general, victims and victimizers had the same social origin: they were peasant farmers. The difference was in popular support; in other words, in the guarantee of future impunity, because it was an irregular civil war that counted on the eventual defeat of the opponent. Impunity implied the right to usurp the goods and the lands of the enemy: in the war of One Thousand Days the aphorism that “who loses the war, loses the estate” became popular (Pardo, 2004). The displacements of the population had two principal effects: the concentration of the land – the best lands – in the hands of the bosses who armed their peons against their enemies, and the change in the political colour of the large regions through reoccupation. One or the other of those effects drove colonization towards regions that had been unoccupied until that moment, and, of course, spurred urban growth.

In 1953, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla [1953-1957] backed by the Liberal Party and a sector of the Conservative Party, staged a coup and immediately decreed amnesty for those who had risen up in arms. The peace agreements signed

by the general at the beginning of his government led, in some regions like Tolima, to the exchange among peasant farmers of usurped properties and the recovery of farms by some of the displaced (Guzmán *et al.*, 1966). It could be concluded that the exchange illustrated that relationship between violence and land. It inspired in many people – like the future presidents Lleras Camargo and Lleras Restrepo – the idea that an agrarian reform was the secret to peace.

To some extent, land reform was one of the bases of the National Front [1958-1974] signed by the two parties in 1956 to topple Rojas and recover power. The initiative was later backed politically and economically by the United States, with the Alliance for Progress, a strategy adopted by President John F. Kennedy [1961-1963] to stem the continental influence of the Cuban revolution [1959] (Lleras Camargo, 1997). Both the Rojas agreements and then the agrarian policy adopted by the National Front, spurred what were-called the “managed colonisations” supported by the World Bank, with three pilot projects: Saravena (Arauca), Ariari (Meta) and la Mona (Caquetá), which to a certain extent accelerated the colonization of the piedemonte Llanero (Foothills of the Plains) between Venezuela and Ecuador, accommodating important contingents of colonization, and, at the same time, preparing the way for the emergence of agricultural and livestock companies. These companies were generated in the chronic and cyclical economic crises of the peasant farmer colonizers. At the same time, in other regions, transport projects of great magnitude were built, which opened new routes to colonization: Magdalena Medio (the Middle Magdalena) was crossed from south to north by a railroad; the highway al Mar (to the sea) (Medellín-Turbo) was finished; the Marginal de la Selva was begun and the connections between Santa Marta and Riohacha and between Riohacha and Valledupar and Bucaramanga were completed. Each stretch of road created a point of colonization and then a small town. From these precarious villages, a new front of colonization emerged. Millions of hectares were integrated into the economic life of the country between 1955 and 1970. These processes – which in their core were true exoduses – traced a new human geography.

### *The Sixties*

Rojas sought to prolong his mandate beyond simple arbitration, and the Liberal Party, knowing that it had a majority, went into opposition. Rojas sought unconditional support from the post-war United States and the Colombian oligarchy and decreed a war against communism. A student demonstration was repressed with bullets in Bogotá [1954], causing several deaths; the government

blamed the incident on the Communist Party and banned its activities. At the same time, the radicalized peasant farmer movement attacked. The movement had not handed in all its weapons to Rojas Pinilla in 1953 and had political influence in the central departments of Cundinamarca and Tolima. This peasant farmer movement, despite having signed a peace, conserved the emblem (cause) of the agrarian reform movement. It was known as the war of Villarrica and was, in reality, the first chapter of the Cold War in Colombia.

The United States tried new counterinsurgent strategies and tactics, led by the recently created School of the Americas. A gigantic operation of siege and destruction, backed by aerial bombardment – napalm made its debut – was carried out during 1955 against the peasant farmer regions of Sumapaz and Tequendama, in Cundinamarca. The peasant farmers in this massif – the refuge for those from the south of Tolima and the north of Cauca – took up arms again. They tried to confront, without success, the government offensive, entrenching themselves in fixed positions, in a kind of native Maginot Line called “la Cortina” (The Curtain). Aerial supremacy defeated this strategy, and the movements’ leaders resorted to guerrilla warfare and organized flight, both of troops and of the civilian population. It was one of the nation’s most massive displacements, still unknown by the nation’s historiography. Peasant farmer self-defence groups were created. They fled east and south; they set themselves up in the jungle and colonized entire regions, where they tried to create a relatively autonomous and self-sufficient government.

It was the first phase of the so-called “armed colonization” (Molano, 1991). Shortly afterwards, the government accused the settlements of being independent republics and attacked them. The self-defence forces resisted the offensive with success and, though they were displaced, escaped destruction. From their regrouping, the FARC emerged in 1964, with an ample theatre of operations: north of Cauca, south of Tolima, west of Meta and the entire massif of Sumapaz in the centre of Cundinamarca. The FARC would become one of the oldest guerrilla movements in the world, if you consider that some of its commanders rose up in arms in 1948. From the regions gripped by irregular war during that period, thousands of families fled to other regions, from which they would be displaced in the Eighties and the Nineties. The testimonies presented in this book show that the road of the displaced is very long and begins way back in time.

The principle zones of influence of the peasant farmer self-defence forces became the eastern foothills and Magdalena Medio. During the Seventies and Eighties this tendency continued and strengthened. The armed groups were

transformed little by little, under the influence of the Communist Party into regular guerrillas of the FARC. This military formation, supported by agrarian unions and neighbourhood committees, held local power of great influence. It was also accepted, to the extent that it not only demanded land but made other complementary demands, like for credits, roads, schools, hospitals and political freedoms. The peasant farmer movement of the Thirties and Forties reappeared in areas of colonization in the Sixties, but, especially in the Seventies, when the bipartidismo (bi-party system) – as will be seen later – wiped out the timid agrarian reform (Ocampo, 1997).

The guerrillas were the head and arms of this new peasant farmer attempt at colonization, which represented a form of displacement, or rather, resolution, regrouping the affected under its ideological and armed authority. At a local level, the guerrillas exerted an absolute power which governed almost all social relations: from the distribution of unoccupied lands to the organization of beauty contests; from the registration of births to the collective construction of roads (Molano, 1998). They were authoritarian executive, legislative and judicial powers. As such, they imposed by force a tax system based on voluntary or obligatory “collaborations” paid by the colonizers or on “vacunas” (inoculations)<sup>1</sup> obligatorily paid by every profitable company: estates, ranches, pawn shops, distributors, traders, transporters. At the pace and to the extent that the armed confrontations between the guerrillas and the security forces intensified, this local government and tax power was extended and deepened. Seen from the perspective of today, these independent republics and the movement of peasant self-defence forces – which transformed into mobile guerrilla forces and were extended throughout the country (Magdalena Medio, Urabá, Santander, Antioquia, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and the whole eastern foothills) – were partly a product of the exclusionary nature of the bi-party system (bipartidismo) of the Frente Nacional (National Front) and of the Cold War (Alape, 1996).

During the post-war period, the army of the United States forged hemispheric pacts of Pan-American defence, based on the doctrine of national security. Colombian military schools taught the thesis of the “internal enemy,” a camouflaged extension of the external enemy, which, at the time, was the Soviet Union. The enemy was not, of course, a uniformed soldier, but a soldier dressed as a civilian and infiltrated in social organizations, who collaborated with the national armed movements, like the guerrillas. This thesis, inspired indirectly by the Maoist strategy of China’s Long March, led theorists of irregular war to highlight the role of the civilian population in such war and formulate strategies to control such con-

nections. The civilian was considered from that time on a potential – or real – enemy. It was thus considered advisable to organize civilians under regular military commands that counteracted the internal enemy. (*Noche y niebla*, 2006).

In Colombia, Law 48 of 1968 was emitted, authorizing the military organization of civilians in a kind of national guard, a figure which disappeared after the last civil war. Legally this was the basis for creating self-defence groups that didn't fully develop until the end of the Seventies, precisely when drug trafficking emerged. As a representative of the Cámara (Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress) for the Liberal Party, the future president of Colombia, César Gaviria [1990-1994] denounced the existence in the country of some 600 paramilitary groups, as the irregular armed forces of the right have been called. Their name comes from the cooperation which they give to the legal armed forces. Therefore, it's not such so simple to say that the paramilitaries arose as a legitimate civilian self-defence. In reality, they were born as a military project, conceived in Washington, and welcomed by the Colombian army and government. And they rapidly began to receive economic assistance from the guerrillas' enemies: cattle ranchers, landlords, traders and, unquestionably, the security forces (Piccoli, 2005). Organizing civilians against the insurgency responded to the image of draining the water from the fish tank, whether through open recruitment, secret collaboration or simply through terror: all methods which are still in use today. The image of the water in the fish tank was inspired by Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara: the guerrillas should move within the civilian population as a fish moves through water.

### *The Seventies*

Law 200 of 1936 – several times cited here – in recognizing the social function of property, ignored the rights acquired by real titles, by tax titles or by simple titles of force; Law 100 of 1944 returned some of the guarantees removed by that norm (Kalmanovitz, 1944). From my point of view, that modification, which was a true agrarian counter-reform, contributed decidedly to la Violencia (The Violence) of the Fifties. It is precisely that mediation that explains how, once the peace was signed through the alternating of the parties in power, an agrarian reform was also agreed upon (Law 61 of 1959), which received a few years later the political and economic backing of the Alliance for Progress. A decade later, the balance was very poor: a million hectares distributed, 90% of them with titles in unoccupied zones or zones of colonization. The reform didn't have many defenders, but the instability and the concerns that it created among the large landowners strengthened its long-time enemies. Lleras Restrepo, who had advanced the reform

as president of the Republic between 1966 and 1970, tried, upon seeing himself cornered by its enemies, to belatedly transform it into a peasant farmer movement (Lleras Restrepo, 1985). A bi-party agreement of 1974, called the Acuerdo de Chicoral (The Chicoral Agreement), retracted Law 61 of 1959 and gave back all the guarantees to the big landowners that they had demanded for investing in the land. With the Green Revolution in process, it also created credit mechanisms – Law 5<sup>a</sup> – to finance the accelerated development of commercial agriculture.

At the beginning of the Seventies, irreconcilable forces clashed: that which Lleras Restrepo had tried to create and which gained political power with the creation of the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (National Association of Peasant Workers) (Anuc) and the counter-reform, which validated the landlords' power. Thousand of hectares on large estates were invaded by peasant farmers, especially on the Atlantic Coast. The security forces repressed the movement, and the government divided the peasant farmer movement into a soft branch, protected by the state and accepted by the landlords, and a hard one, which insisted on a reform with the motto: “land for those who work it” (Kalmanovitz, 1994).

A new chapter opened in agrarian history. Colonization, which was at base a movement of displacement towards unoccupied lands, has been a political resource used by the state to avoid distributing property. And it has been the path chosen by peasant farmers when they are expelled from their lands, when they lose a war or when the cities are overrun by people and unemployment reigns. In the circumstances of the mid Seventies, this mixture of contradictory tendencies arose and the colonization of new lands gained new energy. It should be noted that during those years the import substitution model, conceived by the Comisión Económica para América Latina (Economic Commission for Latin America) (Cepal), showed its limits as growth in the secondary sector slowed (Bejarano, 1987). It also showed its limits in the inability of the government of Misael Pastrana [1970-1974] to synchronize the massive migration to the cities, as a result of the reactivation of industry, with the construction of housing. Urban unemployment led a large number of peasant farmers to move to the areas of colonization and cut down jungles to expand the agricultural frontier. It was in these regions that the seed of drug trafficking fell “as if falling from the sky” – as the peasant farmers themselves said.

### *Colonization and drug trafficking*

Marijuana arrived in the country as a commercial crop of cannabis brought by businessmen and as a prohibited herb imported by Mexican technicians of the banana companies. The first line wasn't very successful and the second

was transformed into a local, small-scale crop for the underworld. Nonetheless, the Vietnam War caused demand in the United States to soar. The Peace Corps – volunteers of the Alliance for Progress who worked in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta – discovered the quality of the local marijuana and became the first small-scale growers and marketers of it. Locals involved in contraband and ex-pilots from the Vietnam War completed the picture. Colombian marijuana became famous in the United States. For Colombia, it was an export crop that very quickly spread throughout the areas of colonization. It was a widespread experiment that, nonetheless, created a culture: of easy money; of the corruption of authorities; of impunity; of a generalized familiarity with weapons. North American supply was soon substituted for the Colombian product with the help of the fumigating of crops here and tolerance there.

The hole left by “marimba<sup>2</sup>” was immediately filled by the trafficking of cocaine base from Perú and Bolivia, which was transformed into cocaine in Colombia and exported to the United States and Europe, where the market was expanding, also as a result of the Vietnam War. Coca is a wild, Andean crop.

First marijuana and then coca arrived to the zones of colonization for two reasons: the poverty of the peasant farmers – in their state of permanent bankruptcy – and the weak and corrupt presence of the state. The guerrillas were fiercely opposed to marijuana and coca crops, believing that it was a strategy of the enemy – principally North American – to corrupt the colonizers and, by enriching them, deprive the insurgency of their social base. But on that front the colonizers offered a dilemma: the guerrillas had to either permit the new crops or the peasant farmers would turn their backs on them. The guerrillas opted for the first alternative, realizing that they could participate in the bonanza through the taxes they controlled. That way the peasant farmers’ “collaboration” would increase as their income increased. The guerrillas jealously guarded the coca crops and the coca trade, as well as the trade in coca processing chemicals, so as to be able to charge a “collaboration” both from the peasant farmers and all the other economic agents of the business. At the same time – and to the same or a greater extent – the competent authorities – the army and the police, the mayors and the judges – collected bribes and the priests, “narco-charity.” It was an era of generalized illegal bonanza to which no social force was stranger. The tradition of the rubber plantations was reborn. And, for diverse reasons, the geography of the two traditions coincided (Salazar, 2001).

Colonization has been not only an escape valve, but also a tool of capital accumulation. The law of colonization has been and continues to be one of:

“you cut it down, I will collect it.” The colonizer is a worker stripped of all resources, except that of family labour. He sometimes even lacks tools. He confronts on his own an incredibly powerful jungle in very adverse conditions. He has to appeal to usury to be able to work and live while he awaits the first harvests, which, as is obvious, he already owes in debt. The richness of the land occasionally allows him a minimal margin of profit, a breath that feeds his hope. Nonetheless, in general, he cuts down the jungle and makes himself a farm with the debts acquired from traders. It’s the same as saying that his work – represented in ‘improvements<sup>3</sup>’ will end up sooner or later in the hands of his creditors, who will concentrate many accumulated farms in a large estate. In truth, the colonizer is legally dispossessed of his land and colonization is a process by which the large landowners (latifundistas) expand the frontier. The colonizers become true professionals in that transference, and thus, live by clearing farms, surviving. In other words, permanent colonization is at base an expression of permanent displacement. Many colonizers end up as peons on the land they cleared, others insist on testing horizons (Molano, 1991).

The growing crisis of the peasant farmer economies of colonization – the lack of roads, scarce credit, the greed of the landowners – has had two consequences: the strengthening of the guerrillas and the “cocalizing” of colonization. They are separate phenomena, gestated, nonetheless, in the same womb: the political exclusion of the opposition and the bankruptcy of the peasant farmer class. The decomposition of the peasant farmer economy and the splintering of its social structure makes for a true explosion, and, therefore, the systematic and massive displacement of the population. With family ties, the neighbourhoods and the entire network of social relationships based on automatic solidarity destroyed, the society of peasant farmers releases a “demographic surplus” and a powerful political energy that in Colombia – as has happened in other countries and in other contexts – is susceptible to transformation into violence and armed conflict. The peasant farmer wars to which history has been witness record it as such. On the other hand, the concentration of property, urban unemployment and low salaries have channelled the decomposition of the peasant farmer class toward the opening of new lands where the state is absent, except to repress all expressions of discontent and disagreement. It is the great historical nuance which explains the origin of the permanent phenomenon of displacement, the uncontrolled and disorderly growth of urban centres and the explosive expansion of colonization.

For the peasant farmers, the illegal crops appeared as the face of a new bonanza, just as rubber, skins, gold and emeralds had been. The peasant farmers soon saw for themselves that with coca, their work was compensated and their



effort recognized for the first time. The illegal crops were for the peasant farmers the embodiment of their dreams and the embodiment of the demands they made on the state: commercialization, credit, roads and access to health, education, and entertainment. In a very short time, the colonizers escaped from chronic bankruptcy and became integrated into the world of consumerism. The guerrillas were astonished. They felt that their chair had been moved. They had lived from peasant farmer collaboration and protection and they feared that the illegal crops would erode their social base by enriching it. They considered marijuana and coca as weapons of imperialism and categorically prohibited their cultivation and commercialization until the day when the peasant farmers told the FARC: "either you permit us coca or we abandon you." At the same time, the guerrillas saw that the areas flooded with money, and therefore, the "taxable" – or "extortionable" – base increased. The insurgency opted for accepting a done deed and used the new bonanza in its favour, a bonanza which – in a strange fate – coincided with the political and ideological crisis of communism. While the guerrillas were left orphans of known horizons, they paradoxically found a solid economic source to contribute to the financing of an ever more intense war in a context where the social conflict got worse and the weakness of the state was clear.

It should be noted that the guerrillas weren't the only force that benefited from drug trafficking. The chain that links direct producers to final consumers is constituted by parallel interests that permit the flourishing and the reproduction of the phenomenon. The sellers of chemical precursors, many of them illicit -- gasoline, permanganate, acids, cement, light salts, acetone – are an integral part of the business, and large capital, created by drug trafficking, was legalized by that route. Large fortunes were also made supplying local and national demand generated by the river of dollars that entered the market; in that sense, contraband held a prominent place. At the same time, the traditional landlords suddenly found themselves with a demand for land that increased the value of their properties and permitted, through the accelerated concentration of land, a real agrarian counter-reform. But perhaps no sector benefited as much as the legally constituted authorities – the security forces, judges, mayors, members of congress. The increase in bribes corrupted the political system from top to bottom. The state, in its multiple forms, was transformed into an organ for participating in all drug trafficking's activities. And, without a doubt, the conditions that allowed the machinery of drug trafficking to function smoothly were the patrimonial nature of the state and the lack of political opposition. The voices and forces that were opposed to the phenomenon and which denounced the venality of the authorities ended up brutally

wiped out or stigmatized as collaborators of the mafias or the guerrillas. Without the impunity and the tradition of corruption it would have been more difficult for drug trafficking to grow in the country. The big partners of drug trafficking were not only hunger and the needs of the people. They were also, without doubt, the corruption and corruptibility of the authorities. The United States State Department's designation of the political system as a "narco-democracy" at the end of the Eighties was not completely off the mark (Tokatlian y Bagley, 1990)

### *The Eighties*

The social conflict had been getting worse since the end of the previous decade. Land invasions, labour strikes, protest mobilizations, blockages of free movement and national stoppages, occurred one after the other. In areas of colonization, the social ferment began to be felt at the beginning of the Eighties. The colonizers of the Sierra de la Macarena (Macarena Mountain Range), faced with a situation in which the government could not recognize occupied lands as property because they were in the intangible area of a national park, organized a series of protest marches to regional capitals, like Villavicencio and San José de Guaviare. Titling for the lands they occupied was their emblem. But at the same time, they made demands on the building of roads, the cheapening of credits, subsidies for commercialization and respect for life. That's when the assassination of leaders of the Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union) (UP) began. This was a political party that emerged from the peace talks between the government of Belisario Betancur [1982-1986] and the guerrillas of the FARC. In the midst of the terror, all the mobilizations ended in agreements, and all the agreements went unfulfilled. Some projects taken on by the government were partially realized, which, added to the disappearance and the assassination of civic leaders and leaders of the UP, led to new mobilizations (Americas Watch, 1993).

It is interesting to note that little was said about coca. It was an unspoken factor. The government didn't want to recognize the fact so as not to have to sanction it, and the colonizers hid it so as not to add a new crime to their precarious legal condition as invaders. Public officials and peasant leaders, nonetheless, dealt with the topic in private. In fact, for the colonizers, it was a negotiation card. The strategy consisted simply in trading coca for development and the presence of the state.

But the problem grew. The areas of cultivation expanded, the commercial activity was truly frenetic. But the response of the state was tardy. Seen from the perspective of today, it's easier to see that the scorn around the issue and

the failure of the agreements were perhaps not that spontaneous. The country was getting rich and all the economic sectors, legal or not, benefited from the bonanza. When President Betancur demanded that the guerrillas, as a condition for negotiations, renounce kidnapping and offensive operations, the guerrillas could give up both things without affecting their military force. At the end of Betancur's government, despite the tragedy of the Palacio de Justicia (Palace of Justice), taken with great violence by the guerrilla movement M-19 – and retaken in the same way by the National Army – and the now systematic assassination of leaders and members of the UP, the possibility of an experimental and local negotiation in Caguán on eradication of illegal crops emerged. The negotiation involved the eradication of crops in exchange for programs of agricultural and livestock promotion and the titling of lands (Pardo, 1996). But the project was frustrated at the beginning of the Virgilio Barco government [1986-1990], when the talks in Puerto Rico (Caquetá) were broken off and the process of negotiation begun by Betancur, came to an end, eliminating, in the process, the Caguán programs. Then came the fumigation of coca crops. This new repressive strategy displaced the population. (Vargas, 1999). The thesis of a narco-guerrilla had been officially adopted by the army, and the government, though it didn't totally accept the thesis, never disavowed it.

Nonetheless, in the south of Cauca and the north of Nariño, the United Nations began a program of crop substitution with the participation of the communities and the support of the state. The condition –given the policies of the organization – stipulated the incompatibility of the programs with fumigation. But the initiative failed for three reasons: 1) the crops that replaced the coca – yuca (cassava) and dried plantains – didn't have a market either guaranteed or previously agreed upon; 2) a good part of the substitution was done with coffee at a time when the world agreement on coffee quotas was falling apart; and 3) the Cali Cartel introduced with very enticing bait the cultivation of poppies so that part of the money that the peasant farmers received as credit for crop substitution financed the planting of the flower. Despite these failures, the United Nations insisted in its projects and inaugurated one in Guaviare and another in Putumayo. Those projects also failed, thus closing that chapter.

At the end of Barco's government, an agreement was reached which was as promoted by the government as it was poor in its results. The Cali Cartel, a true mafia syndicate of drug traffickers from the Valle del Cauca region, accumulated lands in the flat areas of Cauca and el Valle and one of the estates that it wanted to acquire was occupied by Indians, which led to the terrible massacre of El Nilo. The Indians, who, in fact, had been accepting the cultivation of poppies

and tolerating at great risk the occupation of their reservations by drug traffickers decided to ask the government for help in eradicating poppies from all their territories. It was the agreement of Jambaló. The state committed itself to carry out development programs agreed upon between the council of Indian leaders and the government in exchange for a total eradication. The new government rejected little by little the commitment and the agreements were not fulfilled. The fumigation of the Macizo Colombiano (Colombian Massif) and the Central Cordillera (Central Mountain Range) then began. The Indian response was the seizure of highways, marches on Popayán, and the semi-paralysis of the economy of Cauca.

During the government of César Gaviria, [1990-1994] peasant farmer protests were organized in Magdalena Medio, Catatumbo, the Atrato, Vaupés, Guaviare and Caquetá, which sought to commit the Colombian State to development plans as a way of leaving behind the coca economy. The plans, incidentally, were guaranteed by the United Nations and the United States. The agreements were fulfilled only partially.

In the meantime, the rupture of talks with the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (The Guerrilla Coordinating Committee Simón Bolívar) – made up of the FARC, the ELN, the EPL and M-19 – in Caracas and Tlaxcala, spurred armed confrontation (Pardo, 1996). The guerrillas dedicated all their efforts to arming themselves, using as sources of financing, kidnapping, extortion and the “gramaje” – a “tax” on the production and commercialization of coca base and poppy latex. The theatre of war expanded notably and, after the attack on the headquarters of the general staff of the FARC called “Casaverde”, covered nearly the entire country: the troop strength of the FARC consisted of 60 fronts with some 10,000 men.

The military expansion of the guerrilla movement was facilitated, of course, by the cultivation of coca and poppies. But the role of the economic opening (liberalization) also has to be taken very much into account, an opening which came of age during the Gaviria Government. The commercial agriculture that had been declining, as a result of liberalizing measures since the beginning of the Eighties, and, to a lesser extent, because of the importation of food which the abundance of foreign reserves-coca precipitated, entered into a definitive crisis. Many holders of capital sought to take the edge off of bankruptcy by associating with drug trafficking and investing in cattle ranching, one of the few activities protected by tariffs. The importation into the country – or entry into the country as contraband – of corn, rice, cotton, sorghum and soy beans dealt a devastating blow to domestic production, and the cultivation of coca and poppies entered their golden era. Another highly significant factor was the reduction of raw material

imports from Peru and Bolivia for the national production of cocaine. Colombia stopped being an intermediary to become the world's principle producer of cocaine.

### *The Nineties*

The Samper Government [1994-1998], in light of its political crisis and the failure of its attempts to reinitiate dialogue with the guerrillas, increased the fumigation of illegal crops throughout the country. The three most visible results of that strategy were first, that crops were displaced to new areas with the usual contamination and destruction of natural resources; secondly, that the prices of coca and heroin, which might have experienced a significant drop because of oversupply, remained high; and thirdly, an immediate response by the peasant communities. At the urging of the FARC and the ELN, gigantic mobilizations were organized in Magdalena Medio, Guaviare, Caquetá, Putumayo and Cauca. The planes fumigated, not only the illegal crops, but legal crops as well; not only large, entrepreneurial plantations of coca –which in reality were very few, less than one-fifth of the total – but small peasant farmer and Indian plots. The repression of the demonstrations added another point to peasant farmer demands, which were still the same: commercialization, titles, credits, roads, schools and health. Organized by the guerrillas or not, the demands were no different than what politicians stir up at election time, nor from what, with reasonable logic, might contribute to colonizers substituting their coca crops for other crops. The guerrillas benefited not so much from the demonstrations, but from the repression and the failure to fulfil the pacts invariably agreed upon by the peasant farmers and government (Rangel, 2003).

The private armed groups are part of a long and solid tradition and, have been, in recent history, the ideal lever for expelling and displacing peasant farmers, Indians, and Afro-Colombians from their regions of origin. As indicated before, the government authorized the army to create armed civilian groups in the Sixties, a norm that was declared unconstitutional in the Eighties. But in the mid-Nineties they reappeared as “security cooperatives” (known as *Convivir*) to be again declared illegal by the Constitutional Court in 2000. The drug traffickers and the ranchers, the traders and the foreign companies had financed paramilitary groups whose function was to defend with great violence the constituted order and repress local demands that departed from clientelist control.

In the Nineties, drug trafficking gained strength to an astonishing extent. On the economic plane, the drug traffickers amassed the best lands and invested heavily in the financial world; on the social plane, they became a new class,

with an especially aggressive culture. The issue of land concentration throughout the country alarmed many sectors of public opinion. The World Bank in its latest report (2002) affirmed that 0.4% of landowners held 62% of the land. Serious studies by the Universidad de los Andes (Los Andes University) speak of 4.4 million hectares of the best lands in the hands of the drug traffickers. They also say that 60% of the displaced had to abandon their lands to paramilitary groups (Codhes<sup>4</sup> and Unicef, 2002). With the population displaced and their land concentrated in a few hands, the paramilitaries acquired enormous local power and became lords of war. Their properties functioned as dollar “laundries”<sup>5</sup> and became the bases of their illegal business.

With all that, they became involved in political activity that complicated the scheme of traditional domination. The drug traffickers participated directly or indirectly in electoral campaigns and their interference in all the branches of government increased considerably. At the same time, their control over paramilitarism became striking. It could be said that drug trafficking came to have – and still has, and to what an extent! – a non-institutionalized, legal political branch and an armed branch, which the state half combats, but which has gone in a decade from having 1,500 armed men to having more than 30,000. This structure has had two big effects: on one hand, it has intensified the war against the guerrillas and, on the other, it has accelerated and justified the North American intervention, both political and military. Today, Plan Colombia and the extradition treaty are the keys to the United States’ efforts to control public order in the country. The result has been a steady weakening of the Colombian state. Plan Colombia is a political, economic and military cooperation agreement, signed by President Andrés Pastrana [1998-2002], between Colombia and the United States. The original idea was to support the peace policy of the government and combat drug trafficking, but, as a result of the failure of talks with the FARC and the attacks of September 11, 2001, it became a counter-insurgency program (Téllez *et al.*, 2002).

The government’s methods for combating drug trafficking have been unfortunate and, seen in the proper light, counterproductive. With great sacrifices, the so-called Medellín and Cali cartels have been formally dismantled, but in reality drug trafficking is a real hydra de Lerna<sup>6</sup> and its activities continue with new modalities. The death or extradition of its big capos (bosses) has not only failed to weaken drug trafficking, it has strengthened it: 90% of the cocaine consumed in the United States and Europe is Colombian. The eradication campaigns – forced, voluntary, manual or by aerial fumigation with glyphosate – have experienced serious setbacks: mines, guerrilla attacks, planes shot down and denunciations of spraying

4 Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento Forzado (The Consultancy for Human Rights and Forced Displacement). 5 Editor’s note: refers to companies for legalizing money originating in drug trafficking. 6 Editor’s note: terrible water monster in Greek mythology having the shape of a serpent with various heads, each of which, upon being cut, grew back as two. It lived in the lake of Lerna in the Argolid and was destroyed by Hércules on his second try.

over crops that Plan Colombia itself has financed. Those setbacks have meant that the objectives have not been truly fulfilled. The situation is so compromising that the newspaper *El Tiempo*, always inclined to favour the United States, wrote in an editorial: “Plan Colombia promised to reduce coca in the country by half within six years; with that period almost up, there is today, according to the latest report, almost the same amount of coca as there was in 2000.” (*El Tiempo*, 2006). If seen from the perspective of the real area of coca or the international price of cocaine, it is not a victory for the government. Rather, in terms of displacement of crops – which implies felling thousands of hectares of forest – and, therefore, in terms of displacement of people, the result has been highly negative: “The eradication of these crops has contributed – says Codhes – to the displacement of 36,000 people [between 1998 and 2002].” Today, the problem of displacement, both of crops and of people, is affecting Colombia’s relationship with its neighbours, especially, Ecuador and Venezuela: Ecuador will present its case to international courts and, especially, in the Hague. Venezuela has supported that decision and condemned fumigation in border areas, considering it an aggression.

#### *Democratic Security*

In terms of public perception, Democratic Security – the emblematic program of the current government – has been a success and it’s argued rightly that today you can travel overland to the majority of places where before it was risky to go. The most important goal of Democratic Security has been to strike hard at the insurgency, so that the political negotiation with the insurgency will be less costly for the government and the establishment. The government provides statistics on the sustained and important reduction of homicides and kidnappings. Nonetheless, doubts abound with respect to the methodologies that the state uses to compile the statistics, not only in the security area but also in the economic one. The most emblematic case was that of the dismissal of the head of the Departamento Nacional de Estadísticas (National Department of Statistics) (DANE) for having revealed figures of growth and unemployment that didn’t suit Planeación Nacional (National Planning Department). Nonetheless, the big-scale military operations, such as those executed by the FARC against military posts between 1996 and 2000, have been substantially reduced. Not, however, the confrontations and ambushes, which are on the increase and also sustained. (Rangel, 2003). It’s clear that the FARC has been forced to suspend, perhaps definitively, its ambition for a strategy of regular war with confrontations against large masses of the army.

The Comisión Colombiana de Juristas (The Colombian Commission of Jurists) – a human rights ngo that has consultative status at the United Nations – has presented figures that contradict the official ones and show a very different panorama: it recognizes the reduction in kidnapping and homicides, but denounces the increase in forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions and forced displacement (Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2007).

The demobilization of some 30,000 armed paramilitaries did reduce the crime rate in the months that followed the formal acts of the accords of Ralito (2003) signed between the Uribe Government and the general staff of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) (AUC); but only some 2,500 paramilitary commanders have availed themselves of the benefits of the law: there are 3,000 medium-level commanders who, according to the government itself, have been lost sight of and there are some 5,000 individuals more who, according to jailed paramilitary commanders, have taken up arms again for two reasons: first, because the government has partially broken the agreements, and second, because the vacuum left by the AUC upon withdrawing from zones has allowed the FARC to return. The first issue leads one to ask about the real accords made at Ralito. The second puts in doubt the real results of Democratic Security, which is showing its critics to be right in the sense that the FARC has been adopting a kind of pull back strategy and is far from being significantly defeated militarily. The withdrawal of some guerrilla fronts to border zones has had two consequences: diplomatic difficulties with Venezuela and Ecuador, for now, and the displacement of Colombians to those nations. Ecuador has declared that it has 50,000 refugees and Venezuela has nationalized some of the displaced for different reasons, among them, displacement because of war (Valencia, 2002).

The Colombian government is currently trying to get new military aid from the United States government, which considers President Uribe a principal partner. The U.S. Congress, now with a Democratic majority, has made public some reservations, but assistance on the order of \$5 billion dollars is taken for granted over the next three years to strengthen Plan Colombia, now baptized as Plan Victoria (Victory Plan). At the same time, the Colombian Fiscalía (Attorney General's Office) reported that the Dirección Nacional de Estupeficientes (National Narcotics Office) has confiscated in recent days assets worth more than \$8 billion dollars from drug traffickers and paramilitaries, an indication of the economic power that the paramilitaries have and their demonstrated political penetration.

The Ley de Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace Law), approved by the Colombian Congress in 2005 to complement the accords of Ralito, has begun to



be only partially implemented, among other reasons, because the judicial system has been overrun by the appearance before the Fiscalía of just 10% of the potential beneficiaries. But it has had a big effect in the area of public truth, thanks to amendments the Corte Constitucional (Constitutional Court) made when it was being reviewed: the Court didn't accept considering paramilitaries as committing political crimes – they can be extradited – and requires them to respond with legal and illegal assets. It also requires the Fiscalía to challenge the declarations (*versiones libres*) of the accused. The amendment has put the government in a serious predicament. The paramilitary leaders have accused it of treason and some very important ones, like Vicente Castaño and *Martín Llanos*, have refused to accept the law. The development of the law and its application have had unexpected collateral effects: in the first place, it has begun a process, called “parapolítico” (parapolitical process), which has begun to trace the map of relationships between politicians, drug traffickers and paramilitaries, lines which threaten to reach into the world of the big businessmen – including international investors – as well as landlords, judicial and high-level military officers. Secondly, everything indicates that the networks of solidarity between those social sectors have begun to break and could put at serious risk the governability or, even, the stability of the current political regime.

The series of effects undesired – nor calculated – by the government in pushing forward the legalization of paramilitaries and drug traffickers has permitted an understanding of the model which determined the mechanics of the process. Drug trafficking and paramilitarism opted for the concentration of land for various reasons: first, because of the peasant farmer extraction, or at least rural extraction, of the great majority of paramilitaries, even of those commanders who came from the security forces; secondly, because of the solidity that traditionally characterizes large-scale property and permits the effective and safe laundering of money, and thirdly, because power over the land is regional political power and that constitutes a route to national power.

In the end, the strategy of the drug traffickers and the paramilitaries consisted – perhaps still consists – in an assault on political and economic power, without a doubt, with the collaboration of large sectors of the establishment. That puts in doubt whether the whole truth will be revealed, especially when the government and the Fiscalía count on the acceptance and the trust of the great majority of the international community. Under the cloak of the reduction of kidnapping and homicides a great fraud might be in the works, the legal recognition of a new power, whose bases and conduct have been openly terrorist. The expression of this diabolical strategy is the displacement of millions of peasant farmers,

who won't be able to return to their lands until justice is done and their return is backed by guarantees, something which cannot happen unless the international community participates with full independence: if the foreign ministries look at the ongoing processes from an economic and colonialist perspective.

### *Conclusion*

Eric Hobsbawm [1917], a notable English historian and authority on our reality, has said that the two most persistence characteristics of Colombian history are violence and colonization. Since the original theft carried out by the conquistadores, who later became encomenderos (colonists given land and Indians to work it) and then real estate owners, history seems a cyclical process with a redundant taste. Political power is the result of the concentration of land, but is also the easiest tool for seizing lands.

Does that not mean, then, that displacement is the tragic thing that defines us? If we look at things clearly, we see that at the root of colonization is the expulsion of the population, normally forced, which obliges people to find a new region where they can start their lives and social activities over. The tragedy is that in the new circumstances – a kind of promised land – the phenomenon is repeated and violence reappears. The key to the process is the role of land – its possession and exploitation, as well as the resources that it exhibits or hides. The distribution of property implies a great imbalance in the country and, necessarily, the exclusion of a sector of peasant farmers from the enjoyment or control of the land, a mechanism without which the exploitation of work itself would be impossible. Between the large and the small land owners and, of course, the dispossessed, conflictive relationships are established. The concentration and, therefore, the exclusion are not curbed by simple economic mechanisms. On the contrary, they tend to become graver every day. The intervention of the state is necessary to regulate the process. In Colombia, political power, to a large extent a product of the concentration of land, rarely takes measures to reform the problem. Large landholding has been the basis of politics and in the provinces continues to be so.

To the violence born of unequal distribution is added the repression which maintains this order. The excluded, exploited or oppressed are obliged to flee and abandon their property, fruit of their labour and scene of their dreams. Therefore, the state, or the armed landlords, tend to be, from a historic point of view, responsible for displacement. An exodus occurs and people move to another region, where the colonizer cuts down the jungle, sets up his farm, and usually, burdened with debt, is forced to sell again what he has built. The buyer, who is almost

always the creditor, adds the lands of the bankrupt peasant farmer to his own. And in that way, landholdings are further concentrated and the cycle is repeated.

The civil wars of the XIX century were linked to two basic processes: the preservation of political privileges derived from large landholdings and the displacement of the conquered to new regions. Ideology served as an emblem of nationality and represented those tendencies. The concept of Nation is born, paradoxically, from the confrontations and the territorial occupations of the conquerors of the moment, who succeed each other, without a modification in the property regime. It could be said that colonization since the end of the XIX century has been an escape valve which reduces the conflicts created by an unjust distribution of land. And under that formula, agrarian reform has always remained unrealized. Between the Twenties and the Sixties the importance of land – with an enormous political significance as a source of power – was reduced by the creation of business and financial capital. It was the era of import substitution. A high level of substitution could never be achieved because of the limits that large landholding imposed on the market. Those limitations were what Liberalism, allied with leftist and popular movements, tried to remove with the constitutional reform of 1936. The right, led by Conservatism and the Catholic Church, tenaciously opposed the change. The result was the violence of the Fifties, and, again, the displacement of thousands of peasant farmers to the cities and the unoccupied zones. The National Front managed to put an end to the political confrontation between parties, and without wanting to, pushed the conflict into the social arena. To prevent the new type of problem, the confrontation of classes, it tried to execute a land reform, which would reduce the armed confrontation that was beginning to take shape. Despite the support of the Alliance for Progress, it wasn't able to achieve that goal. Instead of redistributing land, the policy further concentrated it and, as a result, added fuel to the conflict. The irregular war not only continued, but intensified.

In the Seventies, subsequent governments drew ever closer to the United States and the conflict was absorbed by the Cold War, which masked the conflict's social character. Thus, the organizing of armed civilian groups, which in all other respects, was a conventional resource of war. In its essence, the idea was to arm civilians – who because of their social nature were closer to the population – to control the most rebellious regions and conduct a dirty war, which by law was prohibited. Many communities were divided and others fled from the new repressive strategy. The new policy expelled many people towards the unoccupied zones where there was no presence of law or towards cities lacking the services to accommodate the unusual growth. In some ways, urbanization and colonization had the same cause.

It must be noted that violence was not the only cause of one or the other tendency. The laws of the market and the legal system that guaranteed them, based on clientelism and the patrimonial nature of the state, have perhaps contributed the most important conditions for that outcome. The existence of the guerrilla movement can be explained – though not justified – by the coherence of the political scheme, which defends the concentration of land and power and, at the same time, prevents a genuine political representation of the affected. Social protest has been repressed with the use of the police, but when it sought to become a political movement, the response has been violent repression. In those social conditions, it is not surprising that drug trafficking and the growing of coca and marijuana have become widespread and assaulted all sectors, all the structures and all the institutions, as is being revealed today. Of course, a big part of the explanation lies in the drug war that the United States imposed beginning in 1961 with the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. But an added element was the regime of political exclusion and economic inequality existing in Colombia. Dependence, corruption and hunger lie at the bottom of this powder keg. Meanwhile, people continue to flee from one place to another, and from one region to another. One tenth of our people flee, living in a kind of permanent exodus. The conditions of the market, always adverse for the weak and, especially for the peasant farmers; the irregular war without end which permits the accumulation of land and economic benefits in cash; the impunity and corruption associated with drug trafficking and the fight against it: all of these associated forces are the real matrix of the incessant displacement of people.

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