

STANDING UP TO DEATH SQUADS

Caught in the crossfire of army, guerrilla, and paramilitary forces, women, farmers, and Indigenous leaders in Colombia fight bravely for the right to live.

IN TOO MANY parts of Colombia, when it comes to a person's rights, assassination is nine-tenths of the law.

Right-wing paramilitary forces have been responsible for most killings in Colombia's war—about 80 percent, according to the U.N. (Guerrillas committed 12 percent, and government forces the remaining 8 percent.) The standard operating procedure for paramilitary forces—despite their rhetoric about fighting the FARC and ELN, the guerrilla movement's two main factions—has been to create a reign of terror among the civilian population, functioning as private armies for private business interests. Colombia leads the world in number of trade unionists murdered, according to Human Rights Watch.

Colombia vies with Sudan for the dubious title "country with the most internally displaced people"—violence has forced as many as 5 million Colombians away from their homes and off land that their families, in many cases, have farmed for generations.

People aren't easily torn from their homes. Often the separation is forged in blood—a

Several names in this article have been changed to protect identities.

neighbor, a father, a brother, or a whole town killed. Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities are especially hard hit. Sometimes it starts with threats painted on a wall or delivered in an anonymous letter; sometimes threats are simply made out loud, by men with guns.

Before the U.S. Congress approved a trade agreement with Colombia in 2011, Sen. Orrin Hatch and others argued that increased trade would "help bring further stability" to a country "emerging from decades of civil strife." It's the same logic that caused Congress to continue giving half a billion dollars a year to Colombia, much of it to the military. But it's dead wrong.

When people in the U.S. buy things such as oil, minerals, and sugar sold by Colombian businesses, we often trade in blood money. Paramilitaries clear away local opposition to mining projects. Paramilitaries drive out small landowners whose land is wanted for large, export-focused agricultural plantations. (Two Girl Scouts recently traveled to Colombia to investigate reported human rights violations in the production of palm oil used in Girl Scout cookies.)

And of course paramilitaries, and to a lesser extent guerrillas, seek to control coca farmers and drug trafficking routes.

A roadside memorial near Triana, Colombia, for those slain by paramilitaries.





At left, members of the women's group MOVICE whose husbands or sons have been paramilitary victims. At right, Manuel and German of the Nasa Indigenous Guard holding ceremonial staffs.



ON A RECENT trip with Witness for Peace to observe the human cost of U.S. trade and military policy in Colombia, I learned just how connected the thuggery is to the rest of us. In Triana, a little mountain town on the winding Cabal-Pombo highway that connects the western port town of Buenaventura to the inland, a group of women told me the story of the highway. We sat in an open-air

might send a letter to the U.S. embassy about a human rights violation, or they might literally stand with a Colombian human rights activists who is under threat. Paramilitaries usually won't assassinate someone if a U.S. citizen is standing next to her.

With the encouragement of MOVICE organizers, the women's group began to speak out about the massacres. Now the group is

How connected are we to Colombia's thuggery?

patio yards from the road. Trucks zoomed toward the port—many with logo-clad shipping containers, a few with military-looking olive coverings. Between 2000 and 2002, the local women explained, paramilitaries killed hundreds of people to clear the way for the expansion of this highway. The massacres were to intimidate farmers out of disputing land rights. "All community organizations fell to pieces because of the killings," one woman said. The terror was also intended to fend off any possible civilian support for the guerrillas.

"Because our relatives were killed, we became hostages of fear; we were scared to death," one of the women told me. Eventually, the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE in Spanish) came to Triana to "accompany" this group of women.

"Accompaniment" is a word I heard often in Colombia—a word that means active solidarity with those facing injustice. When Witness for Peace staff "accompany," they

building a "memory gallery" to hold photographs and biographies of those murdered. They also showed us crosses they have put up along the road to remember the victims.

"We are engaged in a fight against impunity," one woman told me. "The criminals that committed these crimes are living free." Additionally, these women want the government to give their community non-transferable, collective titles to their land; this would give them security against land grabs, including financial or armed pressure to sell.

On the wall next to the patio where we met was a framed print asking for God's blessing. Faith is woven into many Colombians' lives and into their struggle for justice—activists are given courage by their Christian spirituality; an Indigenous Catholic sister accompanies a displaced community. But when I ask a woman in Triana whether the local churches have helped in efforts against impunity for the massacres, she says no: "The churches are not 'political.'"

WHEN MASSACRES PAVE the way for a road, it's not just a case of government turning a blind eye. Instead, terror has become part of the system. Indeed, plentiful evidence has emerged that paramilitaries have deep ties to the Colombian government. Under Álvaro Uribe, president from 2002 to 2010, the government land-reform agency stole real estate earmarked for landless peasants, handing it over to drug cartels and paramilitaries. In September, the former head of domestic intelligence under Uribe was charged with providing paramilitaries a "kill list" of trade union activists. Also, he was found guilty of hiring paramilitaries to assassinate Alfredo Correa de Andreis, a sociologist investigating paramilitary activities.

During Uribe's presidency, the U.S. government poured more than \$6 billion into Colombia, primarily to the army and National lice (both of which have members who train, protect, supply, and coordinate with the paramilitaries). Despite Sen. Hatch's wishes to the contrary, for years there has been a practice in Colombia of eliminating political or business opponents by portraying them as connected to the guerrilla movement. President Juan Manuel Santos, the former Uribe defense minister who took office in August 2010, has verbally defended human rights and the rule of law. However, according to Human Rights Watch, 30 killings of human rights defenders and social leaders took place between July and October 2010.

Politically motivated killing became even more egregious when the military incentivized soldiers by rewarding them with bonuses for the number of guerrilla "kills" they reported. In a ploy now called "false positive" cases, bonus-seeking soldiers kill civilians and pass off their corpses as guerrillas' by planting weapons or dressing them in rebel uniforms.

Over the past two decades, up to 3,000 cases of "false positives" have been reported. The situation gained international attention in 2008 when the bodies of 11 young men, who had been enticed from their hometown of Soacha with job promises, were discovered in a mass grave near the Venezuelan border.

One MOVICE member, Yadira, told me of her pain when her son was similarly

killed: "There's this big empty space in our family," she said. She receives death threats for demanding prosecution.

In the mid-2000s, under international pressure, the Uribe government introduced a law governing the dismantling of the paramilitary death squads. The so-called Justice and Peace law demobilized thousands but gave generous concessions to commanders who had been accused of egregious human rights abuses. And, according to U.N. Special Rapporteur Philip Alston, the government failed to even investigate the "vast majority of paramilitaries responsible for human rights violations."

Many paramilitaries didn't demobilize at all.

I heard firsthand about ongoing militia activity from Alfonso, a small-scale farmer from the west coast region of Cauca. Paramilitaries have been in his area for years, he told me. After the alleged demobilization, they opened shop under new names and got back to business threatening and killing community leaders—elected officials, teachers, a school PTA president.

"The victims are not guerrillas; we are civilian," said Alfonso. The paramilitary gangs may have been hired by businesses running mining operations, oil palm plantations, and a hydro-electric plant in the area. Plus, he said, the paramilitaries profit directly from extortion and "taxing" the coca trade. In Alfonso's community, after paramilitaries got unwanted publicity for displacing more than 100 families, they prohibited everyone else from leaving without permission.

In 2008, a paramilitary gang took over Alfonso's home; he got away, but the rest of his family didn't. At night the militants went out committing acts of violence and murder—which they recorded on video and forced

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Alfonso's two small children to watch. It took Alfonso's family three months to escape. When I met them, they were living in a safe house run by the Ecumenical Commission for Justice and Peace, a Colombian human rights organization.

The experience changed Alfonso: The farmer with a grade-school education became an activist. "We've confronted the government, gone to embassies and human rights groups," he told my group. "We need the truth."

Alfonso has chosen to "accompany" families from his home community. He plans to return to dig up a mass grave of paramilitary victims, he said, despite strong threats against anyone who did so. When asked whether

The U.S. has poured more than \$6 billion into Colombia's army and National Police.

massive U.S. funds channeled to Colombia's military and government also support paramilitary activity, he replied, "We, as victims, see it that way."

THE MOST STRIKING of death-defying activists I met in Colombia were among the Nasa Indigenous peoples, who live mostly in the southwestern provinces of Cauca and Valle de Cauca. Tired of getting caught in the crossfire between armed groups, in 2001 the Nasa organized the Indigenous Guard as a permanent nonviolent civil defense organization. At the office of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca, which had received death threats three weeks earlier, a Nasa representative told me the Indigenous Guard numbers approximately 5,000—women and men of all ages. "Our strength is in our unity," he said. But how can Guard members, each armed only with a ribbon-bedecked ceremonial staff, face down the Colombian military, guerrillas, and paramilitaries, all of whom wield automatic weapons?

It turns out the Nasa's unity *is* their strength.

Jess Hunter-Bowman, Witness for Peace's associate director, explained that even though armed groups are capable of killing hundreds of people at a time, they also know that mass murder brings unwanted attention. One tactic employed by the Indigenous Guard is to identify at-risk locations or situations, then

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Standing Up to Death Squads

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show up in large numbers. For example, in 2004, FARC guerrillas took captive the Nasa mayor of Toribío. Hundreds of Indigenous Guard crowded into the area, held talks with the guerrillas, and eventually walked out with the mayor unharmed.

"We know that the soldiers of the Colombian military are not going to protect us; the guerrillas are not going to protect us," German, a Guard member, explained. "We needed to have our own protection so that we can stay in the land."

Manuel, another Guard member, said they interact daily with the armed groups as part of their nonviolent strategy, first telling them to respect Nasa territory. "We use international humanitarian law to tell them that soldiers and members of illegal armed groups have to stay out of civilian areas," Manuel said. "If they don't respond favorably to that [discussion], then we call in more people and double the number. We explain we're not trying to give some benefit to one of the armed actors over another."

"Accompaniment" means active solidarity with those facing injustice.

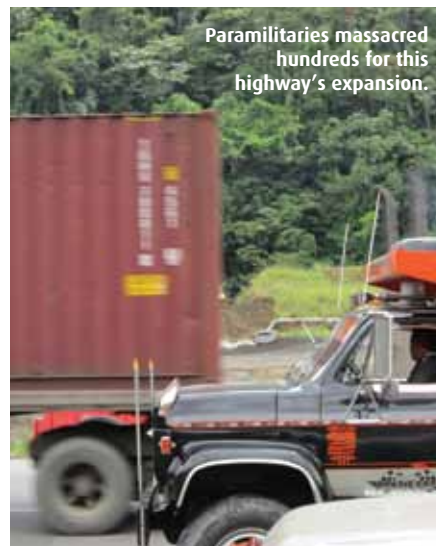
If a firebreak breaks out that endangers Nasa people, Indigenous Guard members walk in with white flags to escort civilians to safety—often leading them to a local safe house established by the Guard to keep people from being displaced.

When I asked how people in the Indigenous Guard train for their profoundly gutsy work, I was struck by one answer: Guard members have often held positions of authority within the Nasa community. Authority does not come from a gun. Authority comes from people.

The Nasa are formidable, and they are faced with formidable obstacles.

In 2009, Colombia's Constitutional Court officially recognized that ongoing displacement and the violence of armed groups threaten Colombia's Indigenous groups with physical and cultural extinction. The guerrillas try to recruit Nasa children as soldiers; the army tries to recruit them as informants. The Court ordered the government to save Indigenous communities. The Nasa demand a plan that is real and holistic, instead of the government's token proposal.

In July 2011, members of FARC rolled a bus full of gasoline down the main street



of Toribío, ostensibly to attack the police department. The explosion destroyed many houses, injured more than 100 people, and killed several, including one police officer. It was a bid to spread fear.

But the Nasa responded with a public demonstration of fearlessness. Ten days later, according to German of the Indigenous Guard, 5,000 people from Cauca's 116

Indigenous communities gathered for two days to focus on how they were "going to survive on these lands when faced with such a terrible conflict." One essential strategy, they determined, was accompaniment and recognition by international groups. Another was a public declaration, whose title shows the Nasa's vision: "To End the War, Defend Autonomy, Rebuild Civilian Goods, and Build the Peace."

"Declarations vs. bombs" seems like an impossible contest. But mass meetings and public statements—and the unity, authority, and community organizing that go with them—are exactly what armed groups are afraid of; it's what they're trying to prevent when they kill PTA presidents and kidnappers. Despite the very real dangers they face, the Nasa and other Colombian activists know that, working with each other and with international friends, they can keep the death threats from being the final word. ■

Elizabeth Palmberg, an associate editor at Sojourners, visited Colombia in August 2011 with a delegation led by Witness for Peace (www.witnessforpeace.org).