



Meeting of victims of violence in Tumaco.

Armed Conflict: Human rights and international humanitarian law violations on the Pacific coast

Summary by Erin Wright, a CSN UW intern

Tumaco is a municipality located in the far southwest of the Colombia, along the Pacific coast reaching towards the Republic of Ecuador. It lies within the department of Nariño, one of 4 departments in the region: Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño, and this region represents the most abandoned corner of the country.

In the region with the greatest bio-diversity, Tumaco represents a community forsaken by its national government. Having 326,735 inhabitants, with 90% being of Afro-Colombian descent, 83.7% are affected by poverty, while the national average is 50.3%. With limited access to clean water, medical care, education, and sanitation, health concerns and malnutrition are prevalent. Fully 16.1% of all individuals between 5 and 17 affected, and children below 5 greatly at risk of malnutrition with 18.5% affected. Illiteracy is high, at 26%, and only 4% of inhabitants are able to achieve a college education, while the national average is 37%.

Armed Conflict continued

With limited education and help from the national government, the people have not had an opportunity to advance economically. Relying on sustainable activities such as fishing, farming, lumber production, or some artisanal gold extraction, the residents have had no training or capital infusion to commercialize their products. There has been a new economy that has grown though, which is industrialized mining.

Endangered by some 300 mines that cause environmental damage, Nariño is the largest producer of coca and has been transformed into a hotbed of drug-trafficking and government corruption. The type of economy being built in the region, based on palm oil, gold mining, and production of lumber, benefits only large companies and fails to benefit the vast majority of the population. And with local stores not being helped by their local government, armed groups in Tumaco can demand excessive payments from them, a practice that resulted in 1,300 of such stores closing in 2010 alone.

Endangered by regional factors, corruption, and a lack of investment in the community itself, unemployment in Tumaco has increased to 72%. This is a striking example of the Colombian

economic model benefiting few, and leaving the vast majority to live in poverty, making it one of the 5 most unequal countries in the world.

Tumaco has not been sheltered from the armed conflict that has raged in Colombia since 1964. It is one of the municipalities with the highest rates of people affected, having 78,000 of its 180,000 inhabitants constantly displaced, the highest rate in the country. A large amount of heartbreak has also been experienced by Tumaco, as conflict has increased, with it having a strong guerilla presence.

Human rights reports are written on the region, which for the past 5 years has had the highest assassination rate in all of Colombia, mainly perpetrated by paramilitaries. Cases of dismemberment, sexual violence against women, and 121 victims of land mines since 2011, make this a chilling example of violations against International Humanitarian Law and basic Human Rights. Some of the worst offenses are a lack of security for the victims who seek justice, and the atrocious operation of the court system, because of 1,300 homicides from 2009-13, only 7 reached sentencing. Similarly for sexual assault, since 2009 only 4 of 314 investigations have ended with a

conviction and sentence.

Those who stand up risk their lives, which is the case for passionate social leaders. In 2001, Yolanda Cerón, the Director of the office of Pastoral Social, was assassinated, and since then 10 more social leaders have been murdered. A representative of victims, Miller Angulo, was one of them in 2012. With Human Rights defenders being murdered or threatened with assassination, an increase in police forces has been unable to reduce the violence and protect the residents of Tumaco.

Tumaco is a municipality ready and willing to gain the support of the Colombia Support Network as a sister community. The social injustice that has gone on here has resulted from the blind eye turned to the civilians of Colombia by its government. And with a police force unable to trim the tide, social investment needs to be made on the national level to assist them, as well as to respect their economic, social, and cultural rights.

—Original report provided by Monsignor Gustavo Giron Higueta of the Diocese of Tumaco, and the Commission for Life, Justice, and Peace

Action On Colombia is the official newsletter of the Colombia Support Network, a national peace and justice network of groups and individuals working to promote respect for human rights in Colombia and a just relationship between the United States and Colombia through grass-roots activism.

CSN supports a nonviolent, negotiated resolution to the conflict in Colombia.

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Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the San Jose de Apartado Massacre: A community continues to seek justice

By Eunice Gibson, Secretary of CSN's Board and Former Madison City Attorney

Thursday, March 12, 2015

The area known as Urabá where Apartadó and San José and the towns up in the hills are located has been dangerous for a long time. In the 1980's and 90's in Urabá it wasn't safe to be a campesino. Guerrillas would come up to you and say, "Help us or we'll kill you." Then the paramilitaries would come up and say, "If you help them, we'll kill you. Help us or we'll kill you." Then the Colombian Army would come up and say, "We know you're all guerrillas and we're going to kill you." Campesinos were regularly robbed and murdered. One of the realities of Colombia's 50-year civil war is that the campesinos were and are the primary victims.

In 1990, the Dane County Board in Madison, Wisconsin passed a resolution naming Apartadó as a sister community.

In 1997 some very brave campesinos, encouraged by the local bishop and Gloria Cuartas, the mayor of Apartadó, formed the Peace Community. Its basis is both religious and political. The members are farmers, campesinos, determined to stay on their land and to be neutral in the war. They would use no weapons and would not give information or supplies to the guerrillas, to the paramilitaries, or to the Army. And they created an organization that was entirely democratic and entirely united.

In many ways, this did not improve the situation. Both democracy and a united organization are terrifying to the

oligarchy. The campesinos were still being harassed, robbed, and murdered. But they stuck together and refused to leave their land. On March 23, 2015, they celebrated the 18th anniversary of their Community. How have they managed to survive for 18 years?

- They have sought and received international support. Accompaniment organizations, such as Peace Brigades International (PBI), send volunteers to live with them. There were actually 15 accompaniment volunteers who attended the anniversary observance that Norman Stockwell and I attended in February of this year.

Other international groups visit the Peace Community frequently and publicize their activities in their own countries. Once a paramilitary accosted a member of the Peace Community on a city street and told him, "Some day the foreigners won't be with you, and then we'll get you good."

- They stick together. They choose their leadership democratically and they support their leaders and their leaders support them. This is how the group responded to the soldiers who confronted them at La Resbalosa just last February 21.

- They keep track. They refuse to acknowledge the Colombian justice system, knowing from experience that it is corrupt and dangerous, but they are careful to record and publicize every threat and every confrontation.

- The massacre and the CSN investigation.

- For years the Army and the Police had kept up a campaign of propaganda

against the Peace Community. Luis Eduardo Guerra was a leader of the Peace Community. He had negotiated with the government on their behalf and traveled abroad, including to Madison, Wisconsin, to tell the story. But on February 20, he needed some cash for medical treatment for his 12-year old son and he planned to go up to his farm in Mulatos to get some cacao to sell. The neighbors and family said, "Don't go, there are soldiers everywhere." But the next day, February 21, he decided to go. His son begged to go along. His half-brother went too. Recently widowed, he had a very young girlfriend, only 17, and she went along. Not far from the Mulatos River, the soldiers saw them and started to yell at them. The half brother took off running. He told us later that he hid in the woods and heard the soldiers yelling and Eduardo screaming and then there was silence. When the bodies of the three were found a couple of days later, the 12-year-old had been beheaded and birds and animals had eaten parts of the 3 dead bodies.

The soldiers and paramilitaries went on up to La Resbalosa where Alfonso Bolivar and a hired man had been working in their cacao planting. They were eating lunch with Alfonso's wife Sandra and their two children, Natalia, who was 5 and Santiago, 18 months old. All of them were killed with machetes. The soldiers and paramilitaries dug a shallow hole in the cacao field and cut up the bodies, covering them with dirt and brush.

As soon as the country found out about the massacre, President Uribe insisted

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The Meeting of Solidarity continued

that the guerrillas were the killers and that the Army had been two days' march distant from the location of the killings. When we interviewed General Fandiño 6 weeks later, he said that was wrong and that the soldiers were only one day's march away and that he had a GPS that told him where his soldiers were at all times.

- As soon as we learned of the massacre, CSN prepared a delegation to investigate. It consisted of Cecilia Zárate-Laun, Norman Stockwell and Conrad Weiffenbach, and my husband and I. The members of the Peace Community had reported previous crimes and had been murdered. They decided not to give the government any testimony. But they were willing to talk to us. When I look at my notes from our interviews, I am amazed at what they were willing to tell us. There could only be one conclusion: the paramilitaries and the Colombian Army had been the killers. You can see our report on the CSN web site. http://colombiasupport.net/2005/6_26_rpt/san_jose_investigation.htm

- The Peace Community's Observation of the 10th Anniversary of the Massacre.

- The Peace Community has observed the anniversary of this massacre every year. Remembrance is a very important principle for them, remembering all of the innocent people who have been murdered over the years. They have built a chapel in Mulatos, first of wood, which there is plenty of all around, but which deteriorates in the tropics. They have made a good start on a segment that is made of stones from the Mulatos River. Remember that the mules had to carry the stones up on the same 5-hour ride that we took, the ride or walk that everyone takes who goes to Mulatos.

- The first memorial event took place on the evening we arrived, February 20. The community gathered to hear a presentation by the attorneys who are representing the community in the ongoing criminal proceedings. As part of the anniversary observance, the lawyers wanted to make sure that their clients, the members of the Peace Community, would understand the current status of the criminal cases and be able to ask questions.

- When another delegation talked to the 17th Brigade colonel in 2006, a year after the massacre and after our investigation, of course we asked about the status of the case. At that time, the misnamed Justice and Peace law providing for the demobilization of the paramilitaries was just beginning to be carried out. One of the colonel's assistants, a young lawyer, predicted that the paramilitaries would start talking pretty soon, because the law was a great deal for them. It provides that if they tell what they know and pay back what they stole, they have to serve no more than 8 years in prison, regardless of how many people they have killed. That law could be the subject of another article. But the young lawyer was right.

- As soon as the paramilitaries started talking, Captain Gordillo, who had led the Army patrol and actually helped commit the murders, entered into a plea bargain. He would plead guilty to murder. The maximum sentence for that is 40 years, but it would be cut to 20 in exchange for his testimony.

- The trial court found the soldiers not guilty, applying a strange theory to the effect that the soldiers had to go along with the massacre because they were outnumbered by the paramilitaries who would have killed them too. The

intermediate court of appeals reversed that finding. It held that the soldiers who actually took part in the killing were guilty of murder, but that the evidence was not clear as to who gave the orders, so the defendants charged with ordering the killing were set free.

- That finding was appealed to the Supreme Court and that appeal is still pending. At the meeting we attended, the lawyers explained to the Community that as part of their argument that the higher level defendants had planned the massacre, they would show the Court the military leadership had planned and carried out a regular scheme of defamation and stigmatization of the Community. They mentioned examples of broadcasts and statements by the government and the Army where members of the Peace Community were identified as guerrillas and guerrilla collaborators.

- The lawyers did not mention the Police, so after the meeting, Norman and I told them about our 2005 interview with the local police chief, who actually showed us a Power Point he had prepared. Its theme was the awfulness of the Peace Community. The police chief claimed that the Peace Community gets a lot of money from internationals but the leaders keep it all or give it to the guerrillas while the members live in misery but are afraid to leave. He said they don't allow children or old people because they are not productive. What seemed the worst to him was that they do not even allow liquor, alcohol, in the Community. We have good notes of that meeting and we promised to furnish them to the legal team to use in support of their arguments.

• The next day was the Memorial Mass. The partly finished apse of the chapel was decorated with a painting by Brigida Gonzalez, depicting the two events of the massacre, and by a large poster containing the portraits of the victims. There was a handout with the photos, and on the reverse, the names of all of the victims going back to 2000. Very small print, because there are so many.

• Fr. Giraldo wore freshly pressed vestments. You would not know you were not at the Vatican, if it had not been for the dog sleeping next to the pews (benches) and the machetes worn by the guitar players.

• In his homily, Fr. Giraldo pointed out that the stones from the river, brought up and installed year by year, symbolize the passage of time, and the permanence of the memorial. The Community will never forget this. He even pointed to the way the Pharaohs of Egypt used stone to challenge the passage of time, but he reminded us that they used slaves and that these stones were carried and installed by loving, willing workers who wanted to preserve the memory of what had happened.

• Father Giraldo repeated the saddest story testified to by one of the paramilitaries confessing his guilt. As the soldiers ran up to Alfonso Bolivar's house firing their weapons, Alfonso ran away and was hiding in the woods. When he heard his wife's screams he ran back, although he knew he would be killed. His two children were hiding under a bed. He knelt down and told the killers to kill him and to spare the children. To ease their fear, he told the children they would be going on a long trip. Fr. Giraldo pointed out that this

was really a trip to eternity, to eternal life. Immediately little Natalia went to get some clothes to pack for her baby brother. And then they were killed, because, according to the paramilitary's testimony, they would grow up to be guerrillas. Thus the stone chapel is a symbol both of eternal life, and of the people's determination never to forget what happened to these two families.

After the homily, communion was served. The Peace Community is both a political and a religious entity, and this memorial mass demonstrates that. It was a blessing and a privilege to be able to take communion with these faithful people.

• The Community also planned a journey to La Resbalosa, where Alfonso and Sandra lived and were killed with their two children, for another memorial observance. This would be another 3 hours walking or by mule and of course

3 hours to return. I knew that this old body would not be able to do that and still be able to do tomorrow's 5 hour mule ride back to San Josecito. So I stayed in Mulatos and missed an important part of the observance. I also missed the confrontation with Army soldiers who had been hiding in the woods and waiting for the Community to arrive.

Finally, in the evening, Fr. Giraldo baptized seven toddlers, dressed in toddler finery, and he required the compadres, the godparents, to promise that they would work for peace and justice. Contrary to the police chief's claim that children were not allowed, the children are treasured. There is nothing quite like baptisms to demonstrate faith in the future, even while remembering a terrible tragedy.



Norman Stockwell and Eunice Gibson on the trail to Mulatos

The Kamentsa and Inga Leaders Defend their Lands

By Beatriz Vejarano,
Colombia Support Network Representative

For the past several years the Kamentsa and Inga indigenous communities of the Sibundoy Valley in Putumayo Department in southern Colombia have faced a great threat to their lands and traditions from the Colombian government's decision to build a highway through a neighboring forest reserve where these communities' sacred lands and water-producing mountains are located. A second threat has appeared in the form of multinational mining corporations, which have received permits from the Colombian government to explore the feasibility of developing large mining projects in lands inhabited and used by the indigenous communities for thousands of years. This article details the efforts of the indigenous leaders to gain government recognition and protection of their rights. (Editor's note)

Once again, the six Indigenous governors of the Sibundoy Valley in southern Colombia ambled through the cold corridors of the cold bureaucracies of this cold city of Bogotá on a rainy day. Their aim: the same it has been for the

past 18 or more years, to demand their legal right to the ancestral territories, a right enshrined in the Colombian constitution and other legal instruments as far back as 1820. (That year, a decree issued by Simón Bolívar ordered the restitution of lands to their rightful owners, the *resguardos* or Indigenous reserve areas created in 1542 to protect the original inhabitants from abusive land seizures and genocide by the Spanish conquerors.)

More precisely, this past March 19th the *Taitas* came to Bogotá seeking the extension (in one case), creation (in five cases) and legalization of six Inga and Kamentsá *resguardos*. Wrapped in their identical striped ceremonial ponchos, they waited patiently for the newly appointed second-in-command of INCODER (the State agency for rural development) to commit himself to finish a process that should have concluded long ago, involving topographic verification and legal certification of the plots of land belonging to the *resguardos*. These are lands willed to the Inga and Kamentsá communities three hundred years ago through a formal deed by their ancestor,

Taita Carlos Tamabioy. The Inga and Kamentsá peoples want to be recognized as legal owners of the lands of which they are the original owners, so they can better preserve the rich natural resources they have been blessed (some would say "cursed") with, and protect the territory from the environmentally and socially damaging road-building, mining, and oil-extracting projects so dear to the government.

But there was at least one hitch: the INCODER topographer charged with assembling the six topographic studies of the *sixcabildos* and producing a final report left her job and took the information with her, apparently refusing to hand it over to the communities or to INCODER. However, this obstacle was finally removed when one of the *Taitas*, in a polite but firm confrontation via telephone, (overheard by all those present and broadcast on the local public television station, Canal Capital), obtained a commitment from the topographer to hand over the information. On the basis of this agreement, a plan was drawn up with specific steps to achieve the extension of one *resguardo* and the creation of five others, all legally established and approved, before the end of July. This is a major victory for the Inga and Kamentsá communities of the Sibundoy Valley. Acting as guarantors of the agreement were the international organizations Amazon Conservation Team (ACT), Forest Peoples Programme, and Colombia Support Network.



Members of the Kamentsa and Inga communities demonstrate to defend their lands

Planting a seed in Afghanistan

(By Buddy Bell,
from *Voices from Creative Non-Violence*)

**If a seed doesn't die,
it simply remains a seed.
But if it dies, through dying,
it bears fruit in abundance.**

This is a rough translation of a hymn I heard many times in Spanish masses in the United States. When I was in San Josecito, Colombia, I heard it again, yet differently, as it was accented with tearful sobs and sniffles echoing throughout the small community chapel, where the Community of Peace San Jose de Apartado was marking the eve of completing its 18th year.

During this time, the community lost many of its members to massacres, to hunger, or to sickness. By 1997, the first year of the Peace Community, a war between government and revolutionary forces had already been going on for several decades. In this context, the Colombian army, AUC paramilitary forces, and FARC rebels all carried out assassinations of Peace Community leaders. They brutally killed and disappeared dozens of community members (and even young children) for simply daring to organize together on a plot of land and declare themselves neutral. The attitude of the armed fighters was, "if you're not supporting us, then we consider you

the same as our enemy."

Still, to not fight for any side was the best chance at survival. To not give information to any side was a crucial piece of demonstrating neutrality. Otherwise, "whichever side we decided to turn toward, we would soon be stabbed from behind."

Remarkably, after 18 years, the peace community still has its land. It has bountiful harvests. It has its own education system for its own children. Above all, the families that make up the community have not gone off to the cities like many of their former neighbors. They still have their livelihoods as farmers. And they can see that the future of this way of life will be bright--- if they work hard, and work together.

This is a community that stands as an example for other people in the world who wish to forge a new path between thickets of war, exploitation, and exile, in order to emerge on the other side with their dignity and their love of peace intact. My trip to San Josecito was largely inspired by such an opportunity to perceive and to convey ideas and feelings, obstacles and decisions.

In March, I was honored to accept an invitation to be present for San Josecito's 18th anniversary celebration, and I was lucky to have the chance to serve as my fellow invited guest and friend Hakim's guide and translator. Hakim has lived for 12 years in Afghanistan while mentoring an inter-ethnic community of young men and women in their teens and twenties who wish to live without participation in war.

This community, the Afghan Peace Volunteers (APV), is involved in protest against war and direct service to poor children and widows in Kabul, yet they are also looking to extend into urban farming and to thrive with the participation of young families, as community

members marry. Hakim thought it prudent to observe and experience a community like San Josecito, which features not only a fierce independence from the political apparatus of war, but also an agricultural character and a longstanding collective community made up of families and elders.

Accordingly, while Hakim was visiting the Peace Community, he was constantly asking questions of people in the community, inquiring of their perspective on community life and what ideas they have for a relatively young community just starting out. They each had plenty to say, and Hakim recorded many of the discussions to play back for the activists in Afghanistan. I hope that with the tools of truth, story and wise counsel, the members of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado will be able to do again what it is that they have never stopped doing—plant a seed and encourage it to transform.



Buddy Bell and Dr. Hakim with Peace Community children

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Action on Colombia

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