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**Civilian peace initiatives
in Colombia**



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On the cover
Photo by Julián Montoni

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“A country at peace does not build itself up from the top”

Photo: PBI



According to the NGO International Alert, Colombia is the society with the highest number of peace initiatives in the world.

“A country at peace does not build itself up from the top; it is the people who have suffered the harshness of war, exclusion and poverty who open the doors for peace. They know that the conflict in this country goes further than the conflict of war and that the construction of social justice is imperative.”¹

This is how the Joint Social Route for Peace (Ruta Social Común para la Paz) presents itself, a space where various regional and national initiatives from the Colombian popular and social movement come together. This space was officially born on the 4th of October 2012 and is the result of various meetings held in different parts of the country during the last two years. Among these stand out the National Land, Territory and Sovereignities Congress;² the National Meeting of Peasant Communities, Afro-Colombians and the Indigenous for Land and Peace in Colombia;³ and the humanitarian visit

that took place in Cauca following the uprising of the indigenous communities.⁴

The Route is the reaction of the Colombian popular and social movement to the announcement of official negotiations between the Colombian Government and the guerrilla army, the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC), on the 4th of September 2012.⁵ The Route aims to articulate the different initiatives from within civil society that make possible a united movement for peace “that does not allow this brave process to go backwards and that the aspirations of the Colombian people are at the centre of the negotiated solutions.”⁶ With this aim, the organizations that participate in this process meet twice a week to debate advances in negotiations and participation proposals, as well as to define activities in their own agenda that look to influence the talks between the government and the FARC.

The Route convened a Great

National Day on the 5th of October to accompany the negotiations between the government and the FARC. Starting in the early hours, Bogotá’s National Park was witness to the arrival of hundreds of protesters from various social and political organizations and platforms who answered the call. In this context, Carlos García of the Marcha Patriótica expressed, “we are going for a political and negotiated solution to the social and armed conflict, for a lasting peace with social justice, and for the construction of a broad process that allows social and popular participation for a new country. We demand guarantees for the integrity of all the social processes committed to this dream.”⁷

The day culminated in the Plaza Bolívar with musical acts and speeches by representatives of the participating organizations. It was carried out as part of the “Week of Indignation- Unitarian Action of Organized Resistance and

Struggle” convened by three coalitions of organizations that were the driving force being the Social Route.⁸ These coalitions are the product of coordination work over the past few years which bring together numerous peace-building experiences and grassroots political alternatives. These are: the Congreso de los Pueblos; the Marcha Patriótica and the Coalición de Movimientos y Organizaciones Sociales en Colombia (Comosoc).

In the 50 plus years of armed conflict that Colombia has lived, the Route is not the first initiative that tries to construct a shared space for the social and popular movement in support of a negotiated way out of the war and the construction of peace. According to the NGO International Alert, Colombia is the society with the highest number of peace initiatives in the world.⁹ For example, since 1994 the Catholic Church has organized the National Conciliation Commission, which in 2011 produced the National Agreement for Reconciliation and Peace in Colombia;¹⁰ the Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace, a pedagogic process that since 1998 works “for a politically negotiated solution to the armed conflict and for a peace with social justice”;¹¹ and the Planet Peace project has been developing a Minimum Agenda for Peace since 2000, together with popular social organizations from various parts of the country.¹²

Organizations like the Center for Research and Popular Education (Cinep) and the Inter-Church Justice and Peace

Commission (CIJP) have supported rural community resistance processes in various parts of the country since the end of the 90s. These processes have led to the creation of the Peace Communities¹³ (like that of San José de Apartadó¹⁴) and Humanitarian and Biodiversity Zones¹⁵ among others, which are initiatives by the civil population to demand respect from the different armed actors engaged in the Colombian Conflict for their territories, lives and work.

Many of the movement’s varied initiatives are lobbying the public policies of the country to encourage participation in the construction of peace and dialogue.

THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT OF VICTIMS OF STATE CRIMES (MOVICE)

Following on from the Colombia Never Again project in 2005 and after four years of the Colombian government’s “Democratic Security” Policy, the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes was officially born as a “body of enforceability, organization and mobilization of the victims of state crimes and organizations of victims”.¹⁶ Due to the high percentage of responsibility of the State in crimes such as extrajudicial executions, torture, forced disappearances and displacements, and the large number of victims, Movice reiterates that “any initiative that tries for a stable and durable peace should count with the full participation of the victims of state crimes.”¹⁷

COLOMBIANOS Y COLOMBIANAS POR LA PAZ

The Colombianos y Colombianas por la Paz (CCP) initiative was officially set up in 2008 with the aim of re-establishing epistolary dialogues with the guerrillas that would lead to a Humanitarian Agreement. Danilo Rueda, of the coordinating team of the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission and CCP member, explains that now is the time to come together, “CCP is developing a special agreement that considers International Humanitarian Law. What we hope is that in some given moment the military operations can cease so that the people who live in conflict zones can feel and experience that there is an atmosphere of détente wherein the armed conflict can be resolved. On the other hand, it is clear that we are fighting together with other social organizations to create a space where society can be heard. This is the support that will make a peace sustainable, tenable and lasting in society.”¹⁸

EXTENDED NATIONAL STUDENT COMMITTEE (MESA AMPLIA NACIONAL ESTUDIANTIL-MANE)

Since last year, the Colombian university student sector has created a process of wide consensus among the different student groups. Even though the street protests in the larger cities last year by thousands of students were motivated by a proposed law reform that

Photo: PBI



The National Movement of Victims of State Crimes emerged as a part of an investigative project called Colombia Never Again that documented crimes against humanity. Within the movement, 283 organisations work together. Today, they have gained recognition and hold an important position within Colombian society.

regulated higher education in Colombia, the Mane, as a platform where various different political and social student voices converge, has positioned itself on the topic of peace and is supporting the activities of the Route. As Álvaro Forero, member of the Mane's national spokespersons team tells it, "The Mane's story in this country is unprecedented. It has gone further than some of the leftist struggles and those of other sectors. And without a doubt, the Route is going on the same path, turning to a social agenda that permits us to achieve peace, and could make possible some real changes in the country."¹⁹

PEOPLES' CONGRESS (CONGRESO DE LOS PUEBLOS)

Berenice Celeyta, president of Nomadesc association, expresses herself much along the same lines, "Now, as before, the challenge is to give expression to a joint proposal that represents all parts of Colombian civil society. We have to acknowledge that there is a lot of diversity in Colombia and all the groups want something different. In any case, with dialogue we can identify these synergies. We start from the basis that we all want peace."²⁰ The Congreso de los Pueblos is an initiative born from the Social and Communitarian Minga that wants to "launch the construction of a common legislation to mandate the future and present of our country with a Latin American and global perspective."²¹ The organizations and movements that form part of the Congress are planning a large Congress for Peace for the coming year.

THE MARCHA PATRIÓTICA

The Marcha Patriótica is a relatively new movement of little more than six months with an organizational structure. It was born as a political and social movement in April 2012 and peace is one of its pledges. For Mauricio Ramos, coordinating member of the Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley (ACVC) and on the board of the Marcha Patriótica, "it makes sense to bet on any initiative that manages to stop the war."²² But the social and popular movement has to play an important part in this. "One of the pledges of the Marcha is that we work together with other expressions of the social and popular

movement for a route that allows us to put an initiative on the [negotiation] table that encompasses the aspirations of the movement."²³

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

In September of this year, various women's organizations and initiatives also united to make up a space called Women for Peace in order to "contribute to the peace process and gain our own voice for women."²⁴ Women for Peace includes organizations such as Corporación Humanas and movements such as the Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres. The women's movement has been developing over many years in different spaces such as the Council on Women and Armed Conflict in Colombia, and the Women's Movement against War and for Peace. These movements and organizations, such as the Grassroots Women's Organization (OFP) and Sisma Mujer, promote and defend the rights of women, youths and children and look for solutions to the armed conflict in Colombia at a local, national and international level.

GRASSROOTS PEACE INITIATIVES

PBI accompanies organizations and people who for years have promoted the initiatives of the social and political movement in support of the transformation of society and the construction of peace. Organizations like Nomadesc, the Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra River Valley, the Committee in Solidarity with Political Prisoners, the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective and many others are under the permanent risk of being threatened, displaced, prosecuted and even killed. They fight against impunity, extrajudicial executions, forced displacement and disappearance, dispossession of land, sexual violence against women due to the armed conflict; and they fight in favour of truth, justice and the comprehensive reparation to victims of these and other such expressions of Colombia's violence. They are organizations that promote grassroots organizational initiatives, local peace initiatives, economic alternatives and food security or the exercise of their rights. These and many other people and organizations that have for years participated in processes such as those described in this bulletin wish to be

protagonists in the construction of peace and ask to participate in the definition of the State's economic and social policies. This process counts on all the political guarantees that a democratic society offers, and with the wide participation of all sectors of Colombian civil society, including those that have historically been more marginalized, such as the indigenous, Afro-Colombian, peasant, women and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual) communities. This is how the Joint Social Route wants it for the International Meeting between the 4th and 6th of December. "Colombia is beginning the negotiation process in a public way. Despite the importance of this effort, it is essential that the accumulated voices of men and women, political prisoners, exiles and refugees, the displaced, disappeared, victims, people with disabilities due to the conflict, organizations, social movements and initiatives work for a way out of the armed and social conflict. That in an articulate way they create a decisive delegation, a joint social route that promotes the construction of peace with social justice."²⁵

1. Joint Social Route for Peace: "Ruta Social Común para la Paz" 8 October 2012
2. "Declaración del Congreso Nacional de Tierras, Territorios y Soberanías," Peoples' Congress; October 2011, Cali
3. "Declaración final: Manifiesto por la Tierra y por la Paz," 14 August 2011
4. "Convocatoria: Visita humanitaria «por la vida, la armonía territorial y la paz, la guerra nos toca, la paz es nuestra»," Caloto – Cauca," 16 and 17 September 2012
5. Presidency of the Republic: "Alocución del presidente de la República Juan Manuel Santos sobre el 'Acuerdo General para la Terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera,'" 4 de September 2012; "Rueda de prensa de los delegados de las Farc y declaración de Timoleón Jiménez," September 2012
6. Minga: "Terminar la guerra: una tarea de Colombia," Ruta Social Común para la Paz," 5 September 2012
7. "Avanza la Semana de la Indignación por la paz con justicia social" Agencia Prensa Rural, 9 October 2012
8. Peoples' Congress: "Llamamiento al pueblo colombiano y del mundo a manifestarse en la semana de la indignación acción unitaria de resistencia y lucha organizada," 9 October 2012
9. Luis I. Sandoval M.: "El papel de la sociedad en la paz democrática"
10. Acuerdo Nacional por la Reconciliación y Paz en Colombia: "Propuesta para la construcción de políticas públicas para la reconciliación y paz en Colombia - Documento ejecutivo, 2011"
11. Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace: "Quiénes somos"
12. Tathiana Montaña Mastizo: "Opciones ciudadanas por la paz," in: Camilo González Posso et al.: La vía ciudadana para construir la paz, Bogotá, 2010
13. Esperanza Hernández: "Comunidades de Paz. Patrimonio de resistencia noviolenta," Volteimnet.org
14. Peace Community of San José de Apartadó: "La historia vivida," 21 de diciembre de 2006
15. Colombian Commission of Jurists, Interchurch Justice and Peace Commission: "Zonas Humanitarias y Zonas de Biodiversidad. Espacios de dignidad para la población desplazada en Colombia"
16. Movice: "Historia," 24 July 2012
17. Declaration by Movice: "Un proceso de paz con participación de las víctimas"
18. Interview with Danilo Rueda, 18 October 2012, Bogotá
19. Interview with Álvaro Forero, 26 October 2012, Bogotá
20. Interview with Berenice Celeyta, October 2012, Cali
21. Peoples' Congress: "¿Qué es el Congreso de los Pueblos?," 10 October 2006
22. Interview with Mauricio Ramos and Fernando Ramírez, 20 October 2012, Bogotá
23. Ibid.
24. Casa de la Mujer: "Acta de conformación," September 2012
25. "Convocatoria encuentro internacional: movimientos sociales e iniciativas de paz. Solución política y paz con justicia social"

In search of peace: the Colombian Indigenous Movement

Photo: PBI



It's Saturday the 20th of October 2012 when I meet Juan Carlos Chindicue, a coordinator of the Indigenous Guard,¹ in the centre of Cali and we set off together 20 minutes on motorbike up towards Alto Napoles, an indigenous "Nasa" community located in the outskirts of the city. As we leave behind the paved road, and the houses begin to close in on us, Cali and the surrounding valley of Cauca unfold before our eyes. I was on my way to talk with the community about their displacement and resistance in the context of the peace negotiations between the FARC (the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia) and the Colombian government. Being one of the populations most affected by the conflict, I was especially interested in learning more about a specifically indigenous perspective on these

potentially historic talks.

Upon arrival, I am greeted by María Eugenia Osnas Osnas, governor of the community's high council (Cabildo Mayor), she tells me "In 2009 25 of us, or 3 families, arrived here after being forcibly displaced. Today more than 250 people live here, some also having been displaced and others simply having come in search of work. The vast majority of us come from the north of Cauca, our ancestral homeland and an area of the country especially scarred by fierce fighting between the government and the FARC."

After María Eugenia shows me around the community and we are sat chatting in the community's meeting hall, it becomes clear that the state maintains very little presence here, except for a military base overlooking the community from a

nearby hill. The electricity, water supply and drainage have all been installed by the residents themselves, whilst the indigenous guard take charge of security. "Supposedly, we are living on 'high risk land', but the truth is the authorities have plans to build apartment blocks here. We live with the constant threat of being ousted and they have attempted to shut off our water supply; in the future we also want to leave but we don't have anywhere to go" María Eugenia explains to me whilst we weave through the houses balanced precariously on stilts occupying every inch of the steep slopes.

Luckily, the Nasa of Alto Naples are not alone in their struggle. Together with other neighbouring communities they are organizing themselves in defence of their water supply, and in their struggle for recognition by the authorities of Cali



The community of Alto Napoles says that they have installed their own electrical systems and water and waste systems.

they enjoy the support of the association of indigenous councils of the north of Cauca (ACIN) and the regional indigenous council of Cauca (CRIC). These two organizations represent indigenous populations in the southwest of Colombia in similar, if not worse, conditions to those in Alto Napoles. In fact, although the level of violence and conflict in Colombia has not increased since 2010 and 2011, according to the national indigenous organization of Colombia (ONIC), 2012 saw a disproportionate and worrying increase in the levels of violence inflicted upon indigenous communities, especially those from the North of Cauca² "It could be pure geographical coincidence, or it could be in reaction to our resistance" María Eugenia explains to me with a sad smile.

A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

Later in the day I meet with Berenice Celeyta, forensic anthropologist and president of the association for investigation and social action (Nomadesc), a Colombian human rights organization accompanied by PBI. She explained how the Colombian indigenous movement has been steadily gaining ground since the eighties. On 12 October 1980, the first National Indigenous Gathering was convened as the first concerted effort among indigenous communities, authorities, and

organisations to provide the indigenous movement in Colombia with a political and organisational structure at the national level.³ Going from strength to strength, they achieved recognition for the full diversity of Colombia in the 1991 Constitution⁴ which opened "a new chapter in the history of indigenous mobilisation."⁵ Since then, they have continued to be at the forefront of the Colombian social movement.

The mobilisation reached its peak in 2008 when more than 40,000 indigenous people, accompanied by representatives from various social sectors, marched nearly 100 kilometres to Cali to demand that the then president Alvaro Uribe Velez halt the violence against indigenous peoples and follow through on various unfulfilled agreements.⁶ However, they were met with disproportionate violence and the use of explosives on the part of the police in addition to shots fired by "men dressed as civilians inter-mingled with police forces."⁷ This violence resulted in three deaths and nearly a hundred injuries.⁸

"Despite the extermination to which, historically, indigenous communities have been subjected, their mobilization has permitted them to denounce abuses and strengthened their resolve," Berenice tells me. "The Minga⁹ for Social and Communitarian Resistance was initiated by the indigenous communities of Cauca and went on to gather the support

of various sectors including peasant farmers, students, workers, and black communities," she adds. Four years later, the Minga continues to mobilise these different populations with its program "Spread the Word" (Caminar la palabra) that addresses five thematic issues: land, war and human rights, economic policies, unfulfilled agreements, and a peoples' agenda.¹⁰

Since the intensification of the conflict in Northern Cauca in July of this year, the Minga has reiterated its support of the demands made by ACIN and CRIC: "All armed actors must withdraw from the area!" These demands have encountered strong criticism from the State, the National Army, and the media¹¹ which peaked after the destruction of several fortifications, and the expulsion of soldiers and guerrillas by the Indigenous Guard.¹²

Though the Government has agreed to talks with representatives from the indigenous movement, the conditions are highly adverse. The communities point out what they perceive as a lack of good will and commitment on the Government's behalf.¹³ This is compounded by the dozens of indigenous leaders who have been threatened or killed, the absence of a cease fire¹⁴, and a national press, which, according to CRIC, is "biased and irresponsible, with content that is racist and disdainful of indigenous autonomy."¹⁵ In Northern Cauca, a



Berenice Celeyta, forensic anthropologist and president of the Association for Social Research and Action (NOMADESC), a human rights organization accompanied by PBI. Photo: Julián Montoni

long a treacherous path to Peace still lies ahead.

WE CANNOT GO IT ALONE: ¡SOLOS NO PODEMOS!

In 2009, the Minga launched the “Peoples’ Congress”, a platform from which to take their proposal for a “transformative peace” to the national level. It began with “pre-congresses” in Cartagena, Bogota and Cali which led up to the Peoples’ Congress in October 2010 in Bogota. This was followed by a thematic gathering on land and sovereignty in 2011, and the planned gatherings for peace and on women in the first semester of 2013 and 2014 respectively. During these events, up to 20,000 “congresistas” come together to develop a “mandate of all mandates” upon which they plan to build legislation for the Colombian people that truly reflects the diversity of the country.¹⁶ “The principle achievements of the Congress are two-fold,” says Berenice: “In the first place, it’s the first movement that, in the face of extreme persecution and barbarity, has united so many diverse social sectors and grassroots communities to present a common proposal for the country. Secondly, despite the great diversity of opinions and needs, we are making progress, overcoming and understanding differences, and this has permitted us to formulate an inclusive strategy that is broad and diverse and also permits us to transform the current conditions of war and conflict.”

“Clearly, we have been surprised,

because to date the proposals from the social movement have not been taken into consideration in the peace talks” Berenice tells me. “If, at this time, they are not able to generate trust to overcome a history of deceit [in these processes] and if they do not open the pathway to a true participation by the Colombian people, they could be squandering a valuable opportunity to build a definitive peace, with social justice and dignity for all: that which the Colombian people have been desperately seeking for so long.”

For these reasons, the Peoples’ Congress continues to gain strength and demands to be heard. Furthermore, the proposals of the Peoples’ Congress are being channelled through the Common Social Path for Peace, a coordinated space which aims to bring together different social sectors, movements, communities and organisations in order to connect with one another in their work towards peace, with the explicit goal of demanding a place at the table in the peace talks between the Farc and the Government that began in October in Oslo.¹⁷

ARMED WITH WORDS

In the Community of Alto Napoles, at the edge of the western cordillera of the Andes and at the periphery of Cali, I felt very far from Oslo. These people are the Nasa, one of 34 indigenous peoples in Colombia that were declared at risk of extinction by the Constitutional Court in 2009.¹⁸ In this way, they are fighting for their very survival which demands the recognition of two principles that sometimes appear mutually exclusive:

diversity and equality. However, the synthesis of these two concepts has become one of the unifying principles of the today’s social movement in Colombia, allowing a unity in facing the war like never before. “We start from the principle,” Berenice very simply puts it, “that we all want peace.”

1. The Indigenous Guard is a security force that is part of the organising process for indigenous Colombian communities in their autonomy and self-governance, principles recognised by the 1991 Constitution.
2. National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC), “[Por la defensa, respeto y exigibilidad de los derechos de los pueblos indígenas en Colombia](#),” January to September 2012
3. ONIC, “[Historia de la Onic](#)”
4. Green Storcel, Abadio, “El aporte de los pueblos indígenas a un país diverso. In: Sánchez Gutiérrez, Enrique & Molina Echeverri, Hernán: [Documentos para la historia del movimiento indígena colombiano contemporáneo](#),” Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2001, pg. 319.
5. González, N. C., “¿Qué papel juegan las organizaciones indígenas del Cauca en la búsqueda de una solución negociada al conflicto y la crisis democrática colombiana?” In: L. Helfrich y S. Kurtenbach (eds.), “Colombia: Caminos para salir de la violencia.” Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/ Vervuert, 2006
6. “[Marcha indígena llega a Cali y se prepara para diálogo con Uribe](#)” El Espectador, 25 October 2008
7. “[Ejército mató a esposa de líder de Minga indígena](#),” Semana, 16 December 2008
8. Contravía, Documentary, “Minga 2008” (Marcha Indígena), Morris Productions, 27 October 2008.
9. Translator’s note: Minga is a term utilised by the indigenous movement in Colombia, and now more broadly, to mean gathering together through social mobilisation and resistance.
10. Rozental, Manuel, “[¿Qué palabra camina la Minga?](#),” Deslinde, November-December 2009
11. ACIN, “[Carta a los grupos armados](#),” 9 July 2012
12. “Indígenas desalojan base militar en Cauca y piden mediación de Baltazar Garzón,” El País, 12 July 2012
13. CRIC, “[Comisiones de trabajo entre autoridades indígenas del Cauca y el Gobierno nacional no avanzan satisfactoriamente](#),” 31 August 2012
14. González Posso, Camilo, “[Negociaciones en medio del terror](#),” Indepaz, September 2012
15. ONIC, “[Por el Derecho fundamental a estar bien informados](#),” 24 July 2012
16. Peoples Congress, “[Objetivos](#),” 8 September 2010
17. ASDEM, “[Nace la ‘Ruta Social Común para La Paz’ «la paz es también salud y educación»](#),” 5 October 2012; PBI Colombia: “A country in peace does not build itself up from the top,” 12 November 2012
18. [Colombian Constitutional Court, Auto 004/09](#), 2009

Civilian peace building initiatives: experiences in Urabá

Photo: Julien Menguini



A happy return for some of the members of the displaced community of Cacarica. A happy return for some of the members of the displaced community of Cacarica.

To achieve true peace, you must solve two kinds of problems according to Javier Giraldo, Jesuit Priest and researcher at the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP). On one hand, you have to meet the basic needs of a population—food, housing, work, education, and health; on the other, you must meet the fundamental needs of coexistence—information and communication, participation, and security.¹

Over the course of the Colombian conflict, small farming communities, Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples in different regions of the country have looked for ways to organise themselves

to respond to these two kinds of needs. In Urabá, in the Northwest part of the country, an area that has lived through systematic violence and massive displacements, the establishment of distinct spaces for civilians came as a result of a need to ensure their security.² The experiences that have come out of this need promote models of community strengthening that includes a holistic view of peace work. Peace is not simply the absence of war, but is “the creation of a positive foundation for social, political, and economic growth, based on respect for fundamental human rights.”³ In a context like Colombia’s, in which the structural causes of the conflict are so deeply rooted

in society, and in which the conflict itself permeates throughout social structures, doing peace-building work requires a focus on comprehensive grassroots work. Organisations like CINEP and the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP) have spent decades working with local communities to develop such initiatives. Together with organisations such as these, diverse community proposals have emerged dedicated to protecting the civilian population and searching for a comprehensive peace.

HUMANITARIAN AND BIODIVERSITY ZONES

At the beginning of the 2000s, the concept of “humanitarian zones” came out of organisations of displaced afro-descendant persons who were attempting to return to their lands. The concept of humanitarian zones is based on International Humanitarian Law, on the principle of distinguishing between civilians and combatants, and the right of civilians to not involve themselves in conflicts or be military targets.⁴ Delineated community settlements send a message that the people who are inside are civilians.

Abilio Peña is a member of CIJP, a Colombian NGO that provides comprehensive accompaniment (humanitarian, legal, educational, psychological, and communicative) to community processes in communities or organisations that assert their rights without resorting to the use of violence in areas of armed conflict. CIJP has accompanied the process of the creation of the first humanitarian zones in Urabá, a model that has been a source of inspiration for communities in other parts of the country. The first humanitarian zones were created in the Cacarica river valley, where in 1997, afro-descendants experienced massive displacement as a result of a series of military and paramilitary operations.⁵ The people who returned in 2001 organised into the Community for Self-Determination, Life, and Dignity (CAVIDA) and used humanitarian zones as a tool to help them return to an area in the midst of an armed conflict. Peña describes this first experience in an interview with PBI: “The key question was, how to stay in an area despite the social and territorial control exerted by paramilitary groups there?” The CAVIDA Community found a solution inspired by the closed residential groups they had observed in their visits to the capitol. They decided to make the boundaries of their two settlements visible, denounce military and paramilitary operations in the area, and refuse entry of guerrilla militias on their land. According to Peña, a delineated area of protection, together with a solid organisational process, helps civilians to be clearly identifiable and locatable to the armed actors. Moreover, “it brings visibility, political support, and national and international recognition. It

is the only model that allows displaced persons to return in the midst of risk. They were able to establish a certain level of stability within the territory, and without it this would not have been possible.”⁶

Through the exchanges facilitated by CIJP, other communities in the region have been inspired by the experience of CAVIDA, among them communities that were displaced during the same wave of military and paramilitary violence in the valleys of Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó, also located in Urabá.⁷ Here, after displacement, oil palm companies entered their valley, drained the lakes and destroyed the rainforest in order to grow hectares of oil palm. When the communities began their first tentative attempts to return, they found the landscape completely changed.⁸ Moreover, “they could not get to their own land because of the strong military and paramilitary control of the area,” explains Abilio Peña.⁹ So they decided to form humanitarian zones in those two valleys as well, as a form of protection.

In addition to the eight humanitarian zones that exist today in Urabá, the valley communities have established 53 “biodiversity zones,” which are spaces for subsistence agriculture¹⁰ that have received the same recognition from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights as the humanitarian zones.¹¹ They mark their plot of land and dedicate it to producing subsistence crops according to ancient traditions, to conserving the forest, and to re-forestation. According to Abilio Peña, “the biodiversity zones emerged in the face of lack of effective restitution by the government. They are a means of returning to the land to cultivate it, protect it, and stop the advance of corporate destruction of the environment.”¹²

PEACE COMMUNITIES

Another civilian initiative has been the peace community. The small farmer population of the township of San José de Apartadó adopted the concept of the “peace community” in 1997 to show their neutrality regarding both legal and illegal armed actors in the middle of the crossfire.¹³ This idea is also based on the same principle of civilian distinction in International Humanitarian Law. Besides reiterating their right not to participate in the armed conflict, the small-scale farmers of the Peace Community have developed

a holistic organisational process based on non-violence.

“It was Eduar Lancheros who encouraged them to analyse their victimisers in order to avoid repeating their behaviour.”¹⁴ They identified three main characteristics: individualism, competition, and slavery to the market. The opposite characteristics inspired the internal rules of the Community: a sense of community, solidarity, and economic autonomy,” recalls Father Giraldo in an interview with PBI.¹⁵ This alternative way of achieving one’s goals provides its own responses to the basic human and co-existential needs of its members. Through a participative structure, they have developed autonomous systems for training and economic solidarity, among others.¹⁶

NATIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED PROTECTION TOOLS

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has awarded and repeatedly renewed protective measures to the Peace Community (since 2000)¹⁷, and to the communities of y Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó (since 2003)¹⁸, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has awarded preventative measures to CAVIDA (since their displacement in 1997).¹⁹ The Court has also supported the creation of humanitarian zones as a “positive mechanism for the protection of civilians facing actions by different armed groups.”²⁰ And it has required Colombia to “provide special protection to the so-named ‘humanitarian zones of refuge’ established by the communities.”²¹ On the other hand the Constitutional Court of Colombia has consistently reaffirmed the State’s obligation to provide special protection to the Peace Community²² and to the residents of the humanitarian zones of Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó.²³ An important order of the Constitutional Court was Decree 448 in May 2010, which urged the Colombian State to implement a Displacement Protection and Prevention Plan for Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó. Other decrees followed this one in March and May 2012 in which the request to the Colombian State was reiterated, insisting that it was a necessary condition in order to carry out the land restitution process effectively.

Moreover, these processes have

acquired significant recognition and international admiration. For example, last year the Peace Community was one of three finalists for the Sajarov Prize for Freedom of Conscience of the European Parliament,²⁴ which has reinforced their economic sustainability through organic crops that they export through fair trade cooperatives.²⁵

CURRENT CONTEXT: A PRECARIOUS SECURITY SITUATION

Despite the successes of these strategies of civilian resistance in the midst of conflict, the security situation of those processes continues to be difficult. National and international visibility, and the act of asserting their right not to participate in the conflict, has exposed the members to all kinds of threats. The members of the Peace Community continue to suffer stigmatisations and threats. In recent months, a series of harassments have been repeatedly directed at the leaders of the Peace Community.²⁶ Javier Giraldo says, “the Peace Community has been building an alternative to society. For this reason they have suffered such attacks since the beginning: the Colombian establishment does not want more communities like this to grow.”²⁷

The security situation of the Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó communities also continues to be problematic due to the presence and control of illegal armed actors in their territory,²⁸ and especially because of the land restitution process in which they are currently participating.²⁹ In 2010, Colombia’s current president, Juan Manuel Santos, elected the land restitution processes of Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó as pilot programs of the “Shock Plan” of government-led land restitution, and with this giving priority and speed to the land return process in this area, without conditioning it on the approval of the Victims and Land Restitution Law. However, despite the requests issues from different entities warning of the security situation in the area, a Protection Plan has yet to be implemented to guarantee the life and physical safety of the affected communities.³⁰ The communities are waiting for an effective restitution that, as explained by the Constitutional Court in multiple pronouncements about

Curbaradó and Jiguamiandó, guarantees that the crimes of the past are not repeated.

CAVIDA is also in a dangerous situation. Since the Supreme Court convicted ex General Rito Alejo del Río for his responsibility in the killing of Marino López,³¹ CAVIDA and CIJP have reported an increase in threats against the leaders of CAVIDA, stops of their boats by alleged paramilitaries, and a direct threat against the CIJP team that accompanies them on the ground.³²

A ROLE BEYOND THE ARMED CONFLICT

Abilio Peña reiterates, “the conflict over land will not be resolved with an armed conflict.” According to him, a peace agreement between the guerrilla and government will not resolve the main source of violations committed against small-scale farmers in Urabá: paramilitary control and the corporate interests connected to them.³³ The humanitarian spaces of Urabá do not only provide protection to civilians—they are laboratories for a sustainable peace, spaces in which other ways of life are taught, as well as connection to the world, in order to overcome the violence. “The Peace Community has formed itself in the midst of war, but has always sought to distance itself from the roots causes of war. Its members search for a philosophy opposite of that of the armed actors, so that they may be builders of peace and life,” concludes Javier Giraldo.³⁴

If community peace proposals such as these can be preserved and protected in order to continue to strengthen and grow, this social grassroots work will create a much stronger foundation for the possibility of a true, sustainable peace in Colombia.

Because of that, at the current crossroads of defining new peace proposals for the future, and of opening new doors, it is necessary to continue to support and give visibility to these kinds of creative ways to be in the world and build new alternatives from an absolutely humanist perspective despite, and beyond, the violence.

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2. Hernández Delgado, “Esperanza: Resistencia civil artesana de paz,” Universidad Javeriana, 2004.
3. [The Chicago Principles on Post-Conflict Justice](#), p. 11.
4. [The Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols](#), 1949, 1977, 2005.
5. PBI Colombia, [Video: Afro-colombian communities commemorate 15 years of forced displacement](#), February 2012
6. Interview with Abilio Peña, Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, 24 October 2012
7. *Ibid.* PBI Colombia, [Video: Afro-colombian communities commemorate 15 years of forced displacement](#).
8. Inter-Church Commission on Justice and Peace, “La Tramoya – Caso tipo 5: Derechos Humanos y Palma Aceitera, Curbaradó y Jiguamiandó,” October 2005
9. *Ibid.* Interview with Abilio Peña
10. [“Zonas de reserva natural y de biodiversidad”](#). The legal foundations of the concept are based on Colombia’s “Statute of the Environment,” which references “reserve zones of the civilian population.” The first reserve zone was created in Curbaradó in June 2006. Interview with a member of the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission (CIJP), April 2011
11. Protective measures of Colombia, case of the communities of Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó, Resolution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 17 November 2009.
12. *Ibid.* Interview with Abilio Peña
13. Javier Giraldo Moreno, S.J. “Fusil o Toga, Toga y Fusil,” 2010, p.33-35.
14. [Eduar Lancheros was a human rights defender and accompanied the Peace Community until his death in June 2012.](#)
15. Interview with Javier Giraldo S.J., researcher with the Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP), 6 December 2012
16. Hernández Delgado, “Esperanza: Resistencia Civil Artesana de Paz,” Javeriana University, 2004, p.393-395.
17. PBI Colombia, [“Comunidad de Paz de San José de Apartadó – medidas de protección.”](#)
18. PBI Colombia, [“La Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos ordena proteger a las comunidades.”](#) 6 April 2012
19. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, [“Medidas cautelares 1997.”](#)
20. Protective measures of Colombia, case of the communities of Jiguamiandó and Curbaradó, Resolution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 15 March 2005.
21. *Ibid.*, Resolution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 6 March 2003.
22. Constitutional Court, [Sentencia de Tutela nº 327/04](#), 15 April 2004; [Sentencia de Tutela nº 1025/07](#), 3 December 2007; [Auto nº 034/12](#), 20 February 2012
23. Constitutional Court, [Auto nº 005/09](#), 26 January 2009; [Auto nº 384/10](#), 10 December 2010; [Auto nº 045/12](#), 7 March 2012; [Auto nº 112/12](#), 18 May 2012
24. European Parliament, Sajarov Prize 2011 for Freedom of Conscience, 15 December 2011
25. Lush Retail, Ltd, [“Urgent Action Needed for our Cocoa Suppliers in Colombia.”](#)
26. Javier Giraldo S.J., [“Derecho de Petición N° 7 al Presidente de Colombia”; “Derecho de Petición N° 8 al Presidente de Colombia.”](#)
27. *Ibid.* Interview with Javier Giraldo S.J.
28. Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, [“Paramilitarismo, ocupantes de mala fe y amenazas a reclamantes de tierra en Curbaradó.”](#) 7 August 2012
29. Nationally, the NGO “We the Defenders” reports that leaders of victims’, displaced, and land restitution organisations received the most threats in 2011. In addition, the NGO underscores the increase in aggressions against defenders involved in land restitution processes. “We the Defenders,” 2011 report. Amnesty International indicates, “Activists who work on issues related to land restitution or represent displaced communities are especially in danger.” Amnesty International, “La situación de derechos humanos en Colombia,” written declaration of Amnesty International before the nineteenth session of the UN Council of Human Rights, from 27 February to 23 March 2010). The SIDH is another organisation that warns of the security situation for individuals reclaiming land: “land restitution and mining are among the current issues causing tension and having an effect on the situation of human rights defenders, both of which mostly affect indigenous and afro-descendant populations.” International Service of Human Rights, “Informe: Defensores de Derechos Humanos en Colombia: ¿Cómo protege el gobierno sus derechos?,” Bogotá, Colombia, December 2011
30. Constitutional Court Decree 045, 7 March 2012
31. [“Exgeneral Rito Alejo del Río condenado a 25 años”](#), Revista Semana, 24 August 2012
32. CIJP, [“Actuaciones paramilitares contra integrantes de Cavida e infracciones al derecho humanitario”](#) 11 September 2012
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34. *Ibid.* interview with Javier Giraldo S.J.

When social movements walk in the search for peace: Experiences from Magdalena Medio

Photo: PBI



Being a region rich in natural resources and a strategic corridor between the North and the South of the country has meant that the inhabitants of Magdalena Medio and its unofficial capital Barrancabermeja have over the years been particularly affected by the Colombian conflict. The giant River Magdalena, that provides the region's name, became more famous for the blood in its waters than for its natural beauty. The guerrilla group the National Liberation Army (ELN), various fronts of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), numerous paramilitary groups trained in the paramilitary school of Puerto Boyacá, as well as a strong peasant farmer and

social movement related to the national oil company Ecopetrol and its trade union "La Unión Sindical Obrera" were all born in Magdalena Medio.¹

Perhaps, rather justly in light of its history, throughout the course of time Magdalena Medio was also the birthplace of a number of peace initiatives. Amongst them, many came from the peasant farmer population that experience the armed conflict and suffer the immediate consequences firsthand. In these initiatives there is a recurring message: the need to "listen to and mobilise every voice in the country in order to advance towards peace with social justice" and to think in a new framework "that allows for the use of our resources and wealth while

overcoming the deep economic and social inequalities."²

A MEETING FOR PEACE

"Where is the right to life for humanity? Where are those who ensure justice for all this evil?" cries the singer/songwriter Víctor Rodríguez in the concert that opened the Peace Meeting of Barrancabermeja.³ "Dialogue is the route" is the conviction that brought together 30,000 people⁴ for three days in Barrancabermeja in August 2011 in a call for peace and an attempt to put the topic back on the country's political agenda.

After winning the National Peace Prize on 24 November 2010, the Peasant Farmers' Association of the Cimitarra

River Valley (ACVC) decided that this symbolic prize would not go unnoticed. From there, came the idea of a national meeting for land and peace that invited peasant farmer communities, indigenous populations and afro descendents to come together in Barrancabermeja in order to demand peace and invite the parties to sit down to talk and listen to the voices of the victims of the conflict.

The Catholic Church, the People's Congress and various social organizations from Barrancabermeja also joined in the organisation of this first massive event presenting the subject of peace after nearly 10 years during which the government denied the very existence of an armed conflict in the country. The event was also supported by the Mayor's office and local government as well as the social movement on a national level.⁵

"At a time when this country did not want to talk about dialogue, the agrarian communities, living directly on the battle field, went out in massive numbers to demand talks", says Miguel Cifuentes, member of the directive committee of the ACVC. He adds, "During the government of Álvaro Uribe, when people were scared to talk about peace and negotiations, this event was an important step to get over this fear."⁶

The conclusions of the discussions carried out were written up in a "Manifiesto for Land and Peace"⁷, which puts emphasis on the need to make the route of dialogue concrete, not just between the parts in conflict, but also through "the broadest social and popular participation."⁸ As

a tool to make this happen, "regional constituents, popular sovereignty and citizen participation spaces, conceived as mechanisms to construct peace and social justice and a political solution to the conflict were prepared and carried out."⁹ These constituents are happening right now in various parts of the country.¹⁰

A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

But the peasant farmers of Magdalena Medio did not wait for the Peace Encounter to take the initiative in favour of peace. Over the years they have conceived humanitarian refuges and Peasant Reserve Zones, among other initiatives, with the aim of being able to live and survive in the middle of the armed conflict.

HUMANITARIAN REFUGES

"The words 'humanitarian refuge' have a lot of impact, a lot of meaning. People seek refuge to protect their lives inside the same country. The government can no longer say that there is no conflict, that there's no war", explains Cifuentes.¹¹

In the years 2000, finding themselves in a situation of "extreme humanitarian crisis caused by the permanent sanitary and food blockade, product of the constant paramilitary and military operations in the region"¹² the peasants had no choice but to find immediate solutions. Therefore, in various opportunities in different districts of Magdalena Medio and Barrancabermeja, hundreds of peasants formed humanitarian refuge camps, temporarily abandoning their

plots of land to protect their lives and integrity and demand solutions from the state.¹³

Supported by social, national and international organizations, the refuges represented a way to make the serious situation of violence endured by the peasants visible. "No armed person entered the refuges" explains Cifuentes. They were a way to protect life, to demand that the problem of paramilitaries in the region be resolved, to end the extrajudicial executions and to demand the conditions for a dignified life.

THE PEASANT RESERVE ZONE OF THE CIMITARRA RIVER VALLEY

But the peasants of Magdalena Medio did not restrict themselves to protection from the conflict and making their situation visible, they made concrete proposals for alternative development. The Peasant Reserve Zone of the Cimitarra River Valley is their emblematic project.

The Peasant Reserve Zone (ZRC¹⁴) is a judicial concept recognised in the Law 160¹⁵ which has as its objective: "promote and stabilise the peasant economy, overcome the causes of the social conflicts which affect them and, in general, create conditions for the achievement of peace and social justice."¹⁶

"We consider that this judicial concept is not sufficient since what we really need is a real agrarian reform. However, it is a first step to demarcate and protect the peasant territory and economy, try to strengthen the peasant farmers through a plan for sustainable development, hold back the landlordism and fight against the displacement which results from this as well as the paramilitary pressure. It is also a binding mechanism for the state, which has to invest in roads, health, agriculture, etc," explains Cifuentes.

Formally recognised in December 2002 through the Resolution 028, the Peasant Reserve Zone of the Cimitarra River Valley was quickly suspended by the Uribe government which had recently come into power. In 2011 the ACVC managed to have the suspension removed through a long advocacy process. From this date, the ACVC devoted itself to bringing the ZRC Development Plan up to date, devising a series of projects to do with farming, forests, infrastructure, education, transformation and commercialisation and organisational strengthening alongside the peasant



communities.

“The Peasant Reserve Zone contributes to peace in the sense that it’s a possibility for the communities to consolidate and to grow” adds Cifuentes. “With the achievement of the development projects, young people will stop getting involved in crime, the army or the guerrillas due to lack of work, health or education.”

Today our organisation is on the verge of handing in the final version of the Development Plan to the Colombian Institute of Rural Development (INCODER¹⁷), the next step is for the State to invest funds in the elaboration of the projects.

On a national level, the ACVC has carried out an important role in training and supporting other peasant organisations looking for ways to stay in their territories. The ACVC formed part of the National Association of Peasant Reserve Zones (ANZORC¹⁸) along with 30 other organisations. ANZORC follows up and circulates information about ZRC all round the country.

At a time where the land issue has come back on to the public agenda of the country and it’s the first point of debate in the negotiations between the government and the FARC, the peasants raise their voices to tell their history, to share their dreams, their demands and their proposals; all this to contribute their grain of salt to the construction of peace.

Women for peace



Photo: PBI

A MOVEMENT AGAINST WAR

Over the last two decades, women leaders have founded new organisations that are generating the social fabric and the vision necessary to build peace.¹ Yolanda Becerra stands before some thirty indigenous women in a white-walled meeting room at the house of the Regional Indigenous Council in Cauca (CRIC) in Popayan. The women are listening to leaders of all ages who have gathered in preparation of the “Women’s Courts,” a new initiative by the Women’s Social Movement against War and for Peace.

Yolanda is the director of the Grassroots Women’s Organisation (OPF) which for the last 40 years has organised, trained and mobilised women from poor areas of the Magdalena Medio region to become human rights defenders and generate self-sufficiency projects. Yolanda is also the coordinator for the Social Movement against War and for Peace, an initiative that women have been building since 1996, first regionally in Magdalena Medio and later expanding to incorporate 40 women’s organisations throughout Colombia with strong representation in indigenous sectors.² “The idea is that no one is representing

anyone else,” says Yolanda. She adds that this is an exercise of empowerment from the bottom up and through the participation of social movements in different regions.

The women in this movement have taken a strong stance against war and militarisation and in favour of peace. According to Yolanda, “We believe that peace can achieve true balance and can be much more real if the participation of women as political actors is part of the equation.” The movement is looking to build peace through grassroots organisations in the different regions. The “Women’s Courts” are an example of building movements from the regions. In November, two of these ‘courts’ or public hearings will be held: one in the oil city of Barrancabermeja where women from throughout Magdalena Medio will participate; the other in Cali where women from the Southwest regions will participate including many indigenous communities. “We make up the Court, those of us who must reclaim our rights,” says Sara Trochez in her strong and proud voice. She is an indigenous woman and leader of the displaced, now functioning as the governor of the Nasa Yuiluvex indigenous council. The ‘courts’ will be a space where women can denounce human rights violations.

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Yolanda Becerra is the director of the Grassroots Women's Organisation and the coordinator for the Social Movement against War and for Peace, an initiative that women have been building since 1996. Photo: Fundación Mujer y Futuro

THE PACIFIC ROUTE (RUTA PACIFICA)

In 1996 the Women's Pacific Route was born. In the beginning, a group of twenty women were looking for a way to travel to the Antioquian Uraba region where they knew that women had been the target of much violence. Those initial 20 women became 300 from all over the country who travelled by bus to Mutata (Antioquia).³ There, the Pacific Route heard the first testimonies of women victims of the armed conflict. For Pacific Route's Teresa Aristizabal, one of the most important mobilisations took place in 2003 when 3700 women travelled 900 kilometres on bus from Medellín to Putumayo at the height of the coca crop fumigations in order to express their solidarity with the women of Putumayo⁴ and to bring attention to violations of International Humanitarian Law.⁵ For Pacific Route, one of the real challenges has been to reach different areas of the country: three years

later the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) burned semi-truck-trailers on the road and blocked Pacific Route's access to Choco.⁶ The women would return to do their work, but it took almost two years to do so as well as many sacrifices in the region. According to Patricia, one of the Pacific Route's founders, the organisation began 16 years ago in Antioquian Uraba because the women that started the process wanted people to understand what happens to women, both in their lives and to their bodies, in war stricken areas. They wanted to empower women through socio-political education and through (re)constructing memory and history. Today, 300 women's organisations throughout the country are participants.⁷

These women have transformed fear into strength. "Transcend fear" is one of the phrases that has become important for all of the women who are involved. Patricia points out, "It's better to continue in fear, than halt our workout of fear."⁸ In this way,

fear becomes strength. The Pacific Route has had important achievements, not just in terms of raising awareness about the situation of women in the armed conflict but also through the legal process and advocacy. "There are a lot of people close to our movement that work in the political and educational realms. In 2008, we achieved two important legal changes: Law 1257 that recognizes the situation of violence due to the armed conflict and Court Ruling 092 (Auto 092) that protects women in the midst of armed conflict through education, housing and other resources," explains Teresa.⁹

ROUNDTABLE ON WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICT

In 2000, the Roundtable on Women and Armed Conflict prepared a report from the then UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy. With this report, they hoped to persuade the Special Rapporteur to visit and verify the situation of



“We believe we need to maintain a connection to our history, continue to appropriate the processes in our own history and above all not forget why they happened; not to exact some kind of revenge but to demand justice.” Jaheira Salazar.

human rights violations against women in Colombia. One year later, the hopes of report’s authors became a reality with the visit of Coomaraswamy. This advocacy work was one of the important milestones in the founding of the Roundtable, which was made of academic women, NGOs and victims of the armed conflict. Since then, the Roundtable has published a report each year about the impact of the Colombian armed conflict on the lives of women and monitored the implementation of recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur. This exercise has generated favourable public opinion and solidarity with the situation of women.¹⁰

WOMEN AND THE ARMED CONFLICT

In addition to these larger women’s movements that are recognised today for their mobilisations and the chants of their women participants-- “Not one more man, not one more woman, not one more peso towards war”--there are also many examples of the important role that women play from the distinct corners of Colombia, from poor neighbourhoods in the outskirts of the cities to forgotten rural areas.

Rosalba, a leader from Cacarica (Choco) speaks with authority about the armed conflict, the importance of the peasant farmer economy, and her community’s resistance. This 48 year old Afro-descendant woman has a youthful smile despite the forced displacement

and threats she has endured. “Many women left with their husbands but they returned alone,” she says.

“It’s the women that have to bear the effects of war, through their bodies, but also in their families to the extent that when families are threatened, it’s the women who have to walk away with the children,” explains Cristina Obregon of Corporation Commitment. She adds that in the majority of cases, the men are either killed or obligated to take part in the conflict. Because of this and in order to avoid leaving their territory “we find a common and very painful issue in Colombia is that forced displacement ends up undermining and degrading the life circumstances of women and families.”¹¹

Thousands of Afro-descendant, indigenous and peasant farmer women have suffered of the consequences of armed conflict over the last century in Colombia and are the principal victims of forced displacement and sexual violence, according to experts and NGOs.¹² However, despite the systematic violence and aggression against women, there is very little knowledge or recognition of the issue.¹³ For indigenous leader Maria Ines Chamorro from the Valle de Cauca region, despite the multiple forms of violence affecting indigenous women—interfamilial, economic, political, social and cultural—the problem remains largely invisible.

For Jaheira Salazar, a young woman from Cacarica who lived through forced

displacement as a child, the struggle for women “is a continual fight, basically from the time we are born, in our homes, with our husbands, amidst machismo.” “Whoever forgets her past is condemned to repeat it. So we believe we need to maintain a connection to our history, continue to appropriate the processes in our own history and above all not forget why they happened; not to exact some kind of revenge but to demand justice.”¹⁴

It inspires real hope to see Yolanda, Teresa, Sara, Jaheira, Rosalba and Maria Inés, along with thousands of other women, promoting the foundations for building peace in their day to day lives as well as the collective memory of the harm that war has inflicted in Colombia.

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