



“Terror is our daily bread. We dare to speak out because the church and the international community need to know what is happening, but if [the paramilitaries and the Army] knew what we were saying we would be shot and killed.”
Community leader, Córdoba.

Colombian churches and non-governmental organizations express grave concern over humanitarian and political crisis in southern Córdoba, northwest Colombia.

In October of 2009, The Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action (Justapaz), Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and the Peace Commission of the Evangelical Council of Colombia (CEDECOL) participated in a delegation to observe the humanitarian and human rights situation in the municipalities of Tierralta, Montelíbano, Valencia and Puerto Libertador in southern Córdoba. Members of Colombia’s Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office and international human rights and refugee agencies also participated in the mission. Findings from this mission illustrate the growing humanitarian crisis in southern Córdoba, a deterioration of respect for human rights in the area, and increased violence as a result of growing paramilitary actions.

Demobilization and Increased Violence

The Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (best known by the acronym AUC) were officially demobilized in 2003. Since this time, there has been a dramatic difference between government proclamations of peace and the reality suffered by local communities. In Córdoba, victims and social leaders testify to violent actions by the rearmed paramilitary groups (Águilas Negras, Autodefensas Gaitanistas, Los Paisas and Los Rastrojos)¹. These “new” groups dispute territorial control and use the same military *modus operandi* that the supposedly demobilized paramilitary groups used. This includes collusion with public security forces and some governmental agencies.

¹ The four groups are independent of one another, but documented cases and testimony from local communities evidence collaboration between the *Águilas Negras* and the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas* on one side, and pitted against the *Paisas* and *Rastrojos* on the other.

Over the last six years, our organizations have accompanied these groups as they struggle to survive in the midst of violence, displacement and intimidation².

After the 2003 negotiations, conflict in Córdoba actually became more complex and multifaceted than prior to the paramilitary demobilization process. This is largely due to the creation of “new” and multiple paramilitary groups—offshoots of the former AUC, a highly organized and centrally controlled body. Residents of Córdoba explain that before the demobilization, while violence reigned, they at least understood who was in control, knew who to negotiate with when given the opportunity and, to a certain degree, could even predict when violence would strike and why. All of these elements provided civil society with minimal control over their lives. With demobilization, the central command structure of the AUC was dismantled. AUC leaders from Córdoba agreed to limited jail time and eventually many leaders were extradited to the U.S. Extradited commanders included Don Berna and Salvatore Mancuso—both key leaders in Córdoba. With the absence of leadership, and inadequate state programs aimed at apprehending and truly reintegrating paramilitaries, former mid-level paramilitary leaders and foot soldiers regrouped. The lines of command are unclear, resulting in uncertainty and chaos for local communities in southern Córdoba. That said, land disputes such as that of the Quindío land tract and community illustrate military operations at the behest of large landholders seeking to extend their control. Dynamics of the conflict in the province today are notably different but not better than before 2003.

Civil Society Targeted

At least one thing has not changed, however, in the last six years: the unarmed civilian population continues to be acutely affected. Murder rates in the province have increased over the last two years, displacement continues at alarming rates and crimes committed by paramilitaries go unprocessed. The result is a near complete deterioration of social fabric of Córdoba and civilians’ ability to engage in meaningful civic, business or social activities. Churches in southern Córdoba continue to provide strong social networks in this context. In the absence of other leadership, pastors and lay leaders have galvanized minimal resources to meet the needs of displaced communities, helped communities regain access to lands lost to aggression by armed groups and diligently worked to secure municipal and national resources for humanitarian work in Córdoba. Pastors and lay leaders are often targeted for their community leadership and simply for their physical presence in areas contested by warring groups. Even when they are not directly engaged in politically sensitive issues such as land rights, pastors and lay leaders face intimidation and violence.

Confrontation of paramilitarism comes with a cost. Entire church communities fall victim to assassinations, threats, and forced displacement. Almost without fail, small-scale farmers (*campesinos*) who seek to recover the lands from which they were violently forced out become military targets, are threatened, and in many cases, murdered. Between January and October of 2009, alleged rearmed paramilitary groups assassinated six evangelical church leaders in southern Córdoba and caused the

² The CEDECOL Peace Commission and Justapaz have been accompanying communities in southern Córdoba since 2001. Lutheran World Relief and Mennonite Central Committee began to do so in 2003.

displacement of five communities, forcing at least 265 families or 1,230 people from their homes³. For many this was a repeat offense. The people living in these areas are profoundly affected in terms of trauma, economic livelihood, and the instillation of fear. Support networks are threatened, diminishing their resources for recourse and healing.

Behind the Violence

Churches are examining the roots of violence giving rise to years of victimization in Córdoba, as well as caring for those affected. Regional and church analysts cite economic interests that “demand” unfettered access to land currently inhabited by campesinos and indigenous communities as a driver of violence displacing people from their lands. The most often cited culprit is drug-trafficking. At least as insidious, however, is big business development in the region such as the cultivation of African palm, mining of coal, gold, and nickel and the earlier development of hydroelectric dams. These economic interests are entangled with a government apparatus used for private benefit—as revealed by the many members of Congress indicted, investigated and suspected of colluding with the paramilitary in the province. This cozy relationship between politicians, the state apparatus, armies and economic heavyweights gives rise to individual threats, targeted assassinations, forced displacement of families, the recruitment of minors into armed groups, and sexual violence against women. Those who take risks to confront violence or seek land justice are systematically targeted and at risk of having their rights violated. The conflict over land rights and territorial control most directly concerns small-scale agriculturalists and large-scale business interests.

Paramilitary groups are usually the material authors of threats, displacement and slaying. Nonetheless, as previously noted the government has failed in its responsibilities of protecting and assisting victims of violence. The inability or unwillingness of government officials to protect and serve victims of violence in Córdoba is a consequence of the co-option of an alarming number of state institutions by paramilitaries or their affiliates. A system of economic favors for private benefit regulated by elected politicians represents a serious impediment to securing social services, access to the judicial system and especially land rights for the people of Córdoba. The compromised government stands in the way of protection, reconciliation, peace-building and economic development in Córdoba.

³ According to the Colombian Presidency’s Agency for Social Action (*Acción Social*), the following collective displacements occurred in the municipalities of southern Córdoba between January and November 5, 2009: San Felipe Cadillo (Tierralta) 108 families, 548 people; Cabildo San Antonio (Puerto Libertador) 49 families, 224 people; Río Verde (Puerto Libertador) 12 families, 50 people; Danta-Alto Cristal (Tierralta) 29 families, 138 people; La Bonita (Tierralta) 67 families, 270 people.

The Justapaz and the Cedecol Peace Commission documentation project registered complaints of families displaced by rearmed paramilitary groups who were refused reception by the Colombian Presidency’s Agency for Social Action (*Acción Social*). The agency reportedly denied them the right to be recognized as victims of displacement for declaring that the responsible parties were new paramilitary groups. According to community testimony, this is a recurrent practice.

The Uncertain Lives of Leaders

We highlight two cases demonstrating the level of insecurity civilians, especially social leaders, experience in Córdoba

Isaac Vargas Martínez is a 32-year-old member of the Association of Evangelical Churches of the Caribbean (AIEC). On August 5, 2009 at approximately noon, five armed men belonging to the *Aguilas Negras* paramilitary group arrived to the home of his father, a church leader, requesting Mr. Vargas' cooperation. The family interpreted the demand as a pretext for the son to make a physical appearance so they could kill him. According to the armed men, the young man was an informant for the *Paisas*, the *Aguilas Negra's* enemy paramilitary group. Mr. Vargas escaped and found refuge in a church building. Church leaders requested help from the Army at 7 pm, yet were told that the brigade could not arrive until 4 pm the following day. The army was 45 minutes to an hour's walk away.

Upon Mr. Vargas' arrival, church members literally surrounded the wooden slat structure and kept watch throughout the night to protect his life. The army arrived at four pm the following day, "saw nothing" and departed. Church members disguised Mr. Vargas and organized an escape plan permitting him to flee on August 8th under paramilitary watch and threats.

Jhon Jairo Martínez was assassinated June 28, 2009. Mr. Martínez' death is emblematic of numerous cases in which the struggle for land rights ends in violence. The father of three led advocacy efforts in the case of the *El Quindio* land tract. After he and his community of 45 campesino families were forcibly displaced in 1996, Colombia's land reform agency, INCORA (since renamed INCODER) relocated them in the nearby *El Quindio* acreage in 1998. Yet proper titles, necessary for displaced beneficiaries to lay claim to the land, were not granted and large-scale land owners appropriated large swaths of the territory. Beginning in 2006 Mr. Martínez alerted the press (*El Meridiano*) and appealed to state institutions (including the Attorney General's Office—*Fiscalía*). His official, public denunciations included the name of the large-scale cattle rancher who directly threatened him and was encroaching on the community land he sought to protect. A letter dated November 10, 2006, outlines commitments from the Colombian land reform agency, INCORA, the Inspector-General (*Procuraduría*), the regional Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (*Defensoría Regional del Pueblo*) and the Montería Mayor's office to "find a solution to the grave situation you have reported." Help never came; his persistent efforts were rewarded only with unfulfilled promises and death threats. The betrayal culminated with his murder.

The family and community attribute the homicide to the cattle rancher and large-scale land holder referenced above who threatened Jhon Jairo. To date, our organizations have not been able to obtain information on advances in the investigation of Mr. Martínez' case. Various community members who have taken up his struggle have been threatened and forcibly displaced.

We are concerned about the lack of guarantees and dignified conditions for communities stripped of their lands who wish to go home, or even stay on land slated for resettlement. While the state claims that conditions for safe returns exist, there are

no safeguards to protect families and individuals that do so. Given the persistence of turf wars enmeshed in armed conflict, many displaced communities fear threats and repeated displacement if they attempt to reclaim the land and the livelihood they enjoyed before it was taken from them.

In the context of death threats and terror we uplift the testimony of local churches that risk further victimization with their refusal to lie. We stand beside those who are threatened and request intervention and safeguards to protect their land rights, their freedom from fear and persecution, and the ability to rebuild their lives.

This report issued by Justapaz, the CEDECOL Peace Commission, Mennonite Central Committee Colombia and Lutheran World Relief.