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Sibylla Brodzinsky

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Voices: Colombia's Path to Peace

SIBYLLA BRODZINSKY



BOGOTÁ—For much of the first half of 2012, Colombia hardly seemed on the path to peace. As they have done for the past half-century, leftist rebels ambushed soldiers, destroyed oil pipelines, set off bombs, and plotted against the government. Government forces, for their part, launched attacks on rebel camps, captured and killed guerrilla leaders, and welcomed deserters.

But as bombs and bullets continued to fly in Colombia, rebels of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and

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government negotiators sat face to face in Havana, Cuba, trying to negotiate an end to the fighting that has persisted longer than most Colombians can remember. Peace talks were launched in October 2012 and President Juan

Manuel Santos has said he hopes a peace deal can be reached by November 2013. It is the fourth time in its 49-year history that the FARC has engaged in peace talks, yet political observers are cautiously optimistic that this time the guerrillas will lay down their arms. Many who have lived under the thumb of the FARC are far more skeptical after seeing peace processes come and go, as government and guerrilla promises are broken. While negotiators haggle in Havana, victims of all sides of Colombia's conflict are trying to make their own personal peace with whatever the conflict has left them.

MESSY CONFLICT

Colombia's conflict is messy and defies easy categorization. Two separate left-wing guerrilla groups—the FARC and the smaller National Liberation Army—rose up against the state in the mid-1960s, turning to kidnapping, extortion, and the drug trade to finance their fight. Right-wing paramilitaries representing a loose alliance of the Colombian military, cocaine traffickers, and wealthy landowners committed widespread massacres and murder before formally demobilizing between 2003 and 2006. In their wake, they've left organized criminal groups dedicated to drug trafficking and extortion, while associated street gangs rule over the *barrios* on the periphery of Colombia's cities. Government forces, meanwhile, struggle to contain the violence, sometimes committing abuses themselves, including extrajudicial executions.

All sides have forced Colombians from their homes through threats, murder, forced recruitment, sexual violence or other abuses. It is estimated that 70,000 people have been killed in the conflict over the past two decades, and as many as 50,000 have disappeared. More than 4 million Colombians—one tenth of today's population—have been internally displaced by violence since 1985, giving the country the second largest displaced population in the world after Sudan. And the displacements continue daily. In 2012, more than 150,000 people were newly displaced.

Sibylla Brodzinsky is co-editor, with Max Schoening, of Throwing Stones at the Moon: Narratives of Colombians Displaced by Violence (2012). The narratives here are compiled from this book and previously unpublished interviews, with names changed to protect their identities.

Behind the numbers are stories of loss, cruelty, and violence punctuated by the determination and defiance of the victims. The forcibly displaced, the *desplazados*, are at once the most pervasive and the most invisible face of victims of the conflict. Many *desplazados* like Alicia Zabala have suffered multiple displacements at the hands of different armed groups. The first time for Alicia was in 2005, when she and her entire family escaped a rebel stronghold in the mountains of Cauca province where they had lived for generations. They fled after members of the FARC killed her cousin, who the guerrillas had suspected was an army informant.

That's when the war against my family started. The FARC commanders said that we knew Omar was a soldier who was there to infiltrate the guerrillas and milicianos, and that we deliberately hadn't alerted them. We were being labeled traitors, and in those parts, traitors get killed. . . . I told my parents we should leave, that otherwise we would be killed. We packed some clothes in a backpack, and we left. We went over the mountains toward the road to catch the four o'clock bus. We hid in the bushes on the side of the road, and when we heard the bus coming, we walked onto the road to flag it down. The day dawned, and we were gone.

Alicia thought she and her three children would be safe resettling in the town of Cartago, where there was no guerrilla presence. At first she would still occasionally get threatening phone calls from the guerrillas back in her hometown, which rattled her. But she began working with an organization that helped other displaced victims of the conflict, like her, report their cases and file claims for assistance. Still, it wasn't long before a new danger threatened Alicia.

There, in Cartago, we didn't have problems with the guerrillas, but {we did} with the paramilitaries. The paramilitaries say that displaced people are guerrillas, when in my case, at least, it was the guerrillas who displaced me. Several people who worked with the organization were killed by the paramilitaries, and they were all displaced people. One day in May 2008 at about three in the afternoon, I was walking down the street when a motorcycle with two riders cut me off. One of them said to the other, "Is that her?" and the other said, "No, that's not her." I took off running and ducked into a store. When I turned to look, I saw that the motorcycle didn't have a license plate. I think those men were looking to kill me but didn't recognize me. I shook all over and cried. Even my tongue trembled. I wanted to leave Cartago and go somewhere else, but we had no money to pick up and leave, and we had nowhere to go. Then, one day in March 2009, my younger daughter Carolina, who was 14, answered my cell phone and burst into tears. She came running to me and said, "Mami, a man just told me that we have 24 hours to get out of town, or we would all be killed." Two days later, the {Interior Ministry's human rights defenders protection} program sent me and my family, including my parents, to Bogotá. They wanted to send me to Switzerland with my three children, but they said that my mother and father would probably not be given a visa. I said, "For nothing in this world would I leave my viejitos {parents} behind. If I have to die here in Bogotá or anywhere else in Colombia, I die, but I won't go without my parents."

PROTECTION

On arriving in the Colombian capital in 2009, she hoped the sheer size of the city of about 8 million would provide her protection. But there she found a new type of violence. After pulling out of a shady deal

with some money launderers, her daughter was raped as a warning for her to keep quiet about the business. She has had to change homes numerous times because of new threats against her and her family.

The latest threat arrived in November 2012, and she has no idea where it came from. Alicia received a strange phone call from a woman who said she was calling from Cartago and needed to know her address in Bogotá. Ever cautious, Alicia said she did not reveal such information over the phone. A week later someone posted a menacing picture on her eldest daughter's Facebook page—an image of a gravestone with the girl's name on it. Several days later, Alicia and her family picked up their few belongings once more and moved to a new neighborhood where they know no one and no one knows them.

All I could do was cry and cry. (In the new neighborhood,) I don't talk to anyone. I just say good morning to the baker and say, "Please sell me a loaf of bread," but that's all. It's not easy, having to move from one day to the next. Every time it gets harder. I ask myself, how much longer will I have to run?

Alicia is skeptical about an eventual peace deal with the FARC, and even if an agreement is reached, it will not automatically mean she and her family will be able to return to their hometown. Several of the people who participated in her cousin's murder were captured or killed because of information she gave to prosecutors.

I can't go back. If the guerrillas demobilize, they will still be there in the town, because they are from there, they were born there, and they might want revenge. Even if we could go back, who'll give us back the loved ones we lost? Who'll give us back the joy?

RETURNING HOME

Emilia Gonzalez is part of a small fraction of Colombia's displaced who have been able to return home. She is a survivor of one of the most gruesome mass killings in Colombia's recent history, known as the El Salado massacre. In February 2000, a right-wing paramilitary group called the Héroes de los Montes de María circled the village of El Salado and killed 60 people over the course of four days, accusing them of being guerrilla collaborators. Emilia's 16-year-old son, forced to sit on the micro-soccer court with all the village men, watched as paramilitaries tortured and killed his friends and neighbors. Paramilitaries raped her 12-year-old daughter. She and her family left town following the massacre and returned two years later to try to rebuild their lives, but the trauma remains.

When El Salado was El Salado, it was a wonderful village. We used to say that as soon as anyone tasted the water here, they felt at home. Today it's not one fourth of what it was then. Now we are ruined. The town was never like it is today, lost among the weeds. When it was still our town, everyone here had a way to make a living. We didn't have to live from handouts. We had tobacco companies here, and we women worked in the plants, smoothing out the tobacco leaves.

Every Saturday we left with our pockets full of money. On weekends, people came in from the countryside with loads of tobacco to sell to the tobacco companies, and we made pots of peto to sell to them. People also brought in merchandise from other towns, and they'd decorate the park with goods for sale. It was a happy town, and people were always waiting for the next celebration. There was the bull festival in January, and Carnival was celebrated in February, where we had beauty pageants and dressed up

in costumes. For Easter week, we'd make pots of chicha and bollo, everyone would go out with plates, and neighbors would hand out food and sweets. In June, it was horse races for the festival of San Juan, and on the day of Santa Rosa de Lima on August 30, we'd take the statue of the saint out from the church and carry her in a procession. In November, everyone would start fixing up their houses and cleaning up the streets to welcome the New Year. We'd put up Christmas trees and holiday lights everywhere. In those days, a priest would come regularly to the village. But since the violence, it's rare. A priest only comes on February 18, for the commemoration of the massacre victims. Otherwise, the church stays closed.

It's been 13 years since the massacre. Every year when February begins, we start talking about it. We say: "The 16th is coming, our first day of torment." It's as if we are reliving those days of the massacre. This year on the 18th, which was the worst day of the massacre, I woke up crying. I dreamed that a bunch of people came knocking on my door; they dragged me out. I was running through the woods, and I couldn't find a way out. When I woke up, I thought, "My God, could it happen again?" I carry my suffering inside me. There are days that I cry, I wake up and ask God, "My God make me forget this." But I can't, I can't. I've done everything, but I can't forget."

ROOTS OF CONFLICT

April 9 marks the anniversary of the event many historians trace as the source of today's conflict—the assassination in 1948 of populist Liberal Party politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, which sparked a long and bloody period of partisan violence known simply as *La Violencia*. Today's guerrillas and conflict were born from that time. This April 9, hundreds of thousands of Colombians—peasants, workers, merchants, politicians, and professionals—marked

the day with massive demonstrations in Bogotá in support of the peace process and in memory of *La Violencia*'s victims.

Alberto Carrasco, who is in his late 70s and lived through *La Violencia* as a boy, did not join the demonstrations, because he does not believe that the peace process will yield any positive results. The last time the FARC decided to negotiate from 1998-2002, he lost his cattle ranch to the rebels. Back then, the rebels were at their strongest and showed little inclination to reach a peace deal. Instead they ruled the safe haven in south central Colombia that was granted to them during the talks like it was their own fiefdom. Alberto and his wife Marieta were

forced to sell their 706-acre farm for a pittance in 2001 to a guerrilla front man, because they refused to plant coca, the raw material used in making cocaine and an important source of income for the rebels. In 2011, the government embarked on an ambitious program of transitional justice to offer reparations to victims, which includes the right of restitution to those who were dispossessed or forced to abandon their lands because of the conflict, including those coerced into selling. An estimated 16.6 million acres, or 12.6 percent of Colombia's agricultural land, has wrongfully changed hands since 1980.

One day in 2001, five or six guerrillas came to the ranch. One of them said to me, "Don Alberto, how's it going? We've come to make

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you a proposition.” I said, “What is it?” He said, “We need you to plant coca here. You put up the land, and we’ll give you a percentage.” I said, “I don’t know anything about growing coca. I only know cattle and pigs.” The guerrilla said, “We’ll keep talking,” and then they left. Two weeks later, a different group of guerrillas showed up. One of them said, “We’ve come to ask you what you’ve decided about the business deal.” I replied, “No, I don’t want to get involved in that.” He said that in about two or three weeks someone was going to come by who wanted to buy the ranch. A few weeks later, two men showed up at the ranch. They were dressed in civilian clothes, but they were armed with shotguns. One of them said, “How much is this ranch worth?” I said it was worth a minimum of 200 million pesos { \$90,000}. . . . He said, “Look, you have to leave here, but so that you don’t leave empty handed, I’ll give you 55 million pesos { \$20,000} for the land and everything on it.” I didn’t have so much cattle on the ranch anymore because things had become so complicated with the pressure from the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, but there were still 50 cows, 40 sheep, and 10 horses. The man said, “I’ve got 55 million pesos, and you have to sign over the deed. This money is so you’ll leave.” Then that bastard said, “Use it for the bus fare.” I had to accept the deal. It was clear that if I didn’t, they’d kill me or my wife or one of my daughters. So that’s how the deal was. I had to work so hard to organize that ranch for 400 heads of cattle, but I loved it.

I sometimes cry alone, thinking about what we had. It’s good that {the government and FARC} are talking again, but I have a lot doubts about the peace process. The FARC are talking because they have to, because they have been weakened, but I don’t think they really want peace. Those of us who know how they work don’t believe they’ll demobilize. I do have faith in the land restitution. We submitted all the papers and are waiting for the hearings. I was told that the man who I was forced to

sell to had been killed, but I asked around and some rancher friends of mine told me that no, he was still there. I don’t know how he’ll react when the judge rules in my favor. Some say the FARC are still around there, but others say it’s calm. I haven’t been back there since we had to leave. And we don’t want to go back. We have been living with my daughter in Bogotá for the past three years, but it’s hard for us living in a high-rise surrounded by bricks. If we could just sell the farm—sell it for what it’s worth this time—we could move to a small town somewhere where it’s warm and start over.

FINAL CONFLICT

Colombia remains the scene of the Western Hemisphere’s last and longest running major armed conflict. For the first time, a peace deal with the FARC, the oldest and strongest rebel group, looks like a distinct possibility, and would be a watershed moment in the country’s tortured history.

But Colombia has signed peace deals before—in the 1990s with smaller guerrilla groups like M-19, the Socialist Renovation Current, and the People’s Liberation Army, and in the 2000s with right-wing paramilitary groups that comprised the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia. The demands for justice and reparations of those victimized by these organizations were generally ignored in the name of “peace,” often resulting new cycles of violence.

In the current negotiations with the FARC, the issue of victims is on the limited five point agenda, but these victims have been given no voice in the negotiations, giving way to skepticism and distrust. Unless the victims, as well as the broader society, buy into the process, peace with the FARC would change little in their lives. Any such peace would need to put some of what has been torn apart back together. ●