CASE 10. Forced displacement:

Paramilitary violence against the campesinos of El Toco (Colombia, 1997)

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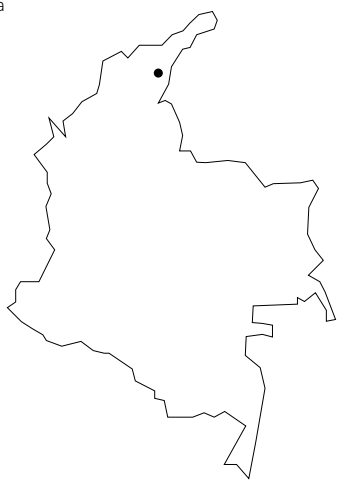
COUNTRY

Colombia



PERPETRATOR

AUC paramilitaries

ACT

carried out targeted killings and forced abductions in El Toco

OBJECTIVES*

- to force the displacement of El Toco's campesino ('peasant') community
- to gain territorial control and repopulate the land with supporters or to sell it to large multinational companies
- to punish people who they be perceived as supporters of the opponent guerrillas

** As far as we have been able to discern; the list may not be exhaustive in this regard*

CONSEQUENCES

The death of selected individuals

Long-term internal displacement

↳ leading to loss of income and property of the displaced

↳ causing long-standing judicial disputes over land ownership

Psychological trauma among survivors

I was anxious because everyone was saying that the paramilitaries were coming. A year went by and nothing happened, until the day they arrived.[1]

Land has been the central element of struggle in Colombia since the nineteenth century, with campesinos finding themselves in the midst of violent confrontations between armed groups that the country has known throughout history. The movement of campesinos – the Spanish term for people engaged in agricultural activities, usually landless but with the aspiration of holding small ownership – into public lands is perceived as a democratic distribution of land and an alternative to latifundia, the keeping of large estates (Kalmanovitz Krauter & López Enciso, 2006). Land occupation allows thousands of campesino families access to land, economic independence, and the opportunity to participate in the agricultural export market. Large landowners and local elites have also occupied public land as a method to obtain property rights (LeGrand, 1986; Zamosc, 1986). Campesinos and landowners have disputed land ownership since the foundation of Colombia as a country in 1810 until today. Land has been the cause and stake of various civil wars, partisan confrontations, and the current implementation of a peace deal between the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government. The occupation of land is a risky business. The history of settlements in Colombia shows that occupying land does not guarantee property rights: In many instances, the establishment gets campesinos evicted or forcibly displaced.

In the Cesar region in the north of Colombia, rumours about where it would be opportune to settle were the starting point for the creation of campesino communities. In 1991, 27 campesinos occupied El Toco, a rural area in the municipality of San Diego. Federico Centeno, one of the first occupants of El Toco, explains: 'The occupation was something illegal, many were afraid of it. We organised everything and when we started, we could not go back.' The campesinos had to clear the way through the bush, finding snakes and wild animals in the land. They made it to what they believed was the centre of the property and built the first hamlet. Within 5 years, the number of campesinos increased from 28 individuals to 80 households. They divided the area into equal plots and made requests for land grants and ownership legalisation to the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA). However, their way of living would soon be threatened with the advance of paramilitary groups into the region.

10.1 Case: The forced displacement of El Toco's campesino community[2]

On the night of 22 April 1997, Adelina was sleeping next to her husband Jaime Centeno and their three children when they heard the sounds of soldiers' boots next to their house in El Toco.[3] A group of 30 paramilitaries arrived in El Toco with the order to kill the members of the Community Council and force the other inhabitants to leave their homes. Jaime was one of the members of the Council. He later tells:

> *It was about eleven o'clock at night. We were sleeping. Somebody knocked on our window.*

> *I had a small revolver and got scared. While I hid, Adelina went to open the door. I went behind the door to cover myself.*

Adelina got out of bed, waited for Jaime to be in position, and opened the door. Jaime remembers the conversation between the paramilitaries and Adelina:

- *Where is your husband? – asked a paramilitary.*
- *He went out yesterday to Codazzi to buy some food and has not come back – said Adelina.*
- *Is it true that he is not here? – replied the man.*

The armed men stepped into the house and searched every corner. They saw only three children sleeping in the hammocks. Again, they inquired of Adelina the whereabouts of her husband. She insisted he was not there. They asked for some water, asking her to drink it first to check if it was poisoned.

Like a shadow and clinging to his gun, Jaime held his breath behind the door. 'I was very scared; they came here to kill people. I thought I would shoot the first one that discovers me. If they kill me, I will kill at least one too'. Outside, however, Adelina was the one facing the paramilitaries. They told her to accompany them to the centre of the village. One of the paramilitaries closed the door of the house. Jaime did not move; he followed the sounds of the boots. 'I was sure they were going to kill her', he points out. When Adelina and the armed men disappeared in the bush, Jaime left the house and headed to Augustín Codazzi, the closest municipality.

Adelina remembers that she was barefoot and that she had no fear. She showed them the location of the centre of the village, where the school and the local shop were located. 'They told me to go back to the house. At that moment, I got very scared because feeling them in my back made me nervous. But that was not my day, they did not shoot me', says Adelina.

The paramilitary squad commanded by Juan Andrés Álvarez (alias Daniel) and Francisco Gaviria (alias Mario) was not improvising in El Toco. As was the case in other campesino communities in Cesar, the armed men already had a list with the names of the community leaders. Gaviria, now a convicted ex-combatant, explained in court that they planned to get the people out of their houses, kill the leaders in front of the villagers, and then force them to abandon the land or face death. When they arrived at the centre of the community property, Gaviria realised that they had only captured one of the five people who were on the list to be killed:

> *That order was given by Jorge 40 [the commander of the AUC paramilitary]. He gave us a list of about five people. In El Toco, we took the people out of the houses and gathered them together in a little court that was there. […] We told them: we need you to leave the area, that was the order, that the area had to be cleared. I took one of the persons we captured, and then Daniel told me on the radio: Mario, do what you have to do. That was when I took my gun to shoot the victim. (Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, 2011)*

Gaviria murdered Javier Contreras, secretary of El Toco's Community Council, and Fernando López, the son of the president of the Council who was absent from the territory. Most of El Toco's campesinos abandoned the land on that day. Those who remained would leave a month later, when the paramilitaries entered the neighbouring village of Los Brasiles and killed eight campesinos, including five members of the El Toco community. That triggered the definitive displacement of the 80 households that composed the community. Pedro, a campesino of El Toco, notes: '[W]hen I saw those killings, I decided that it was better to leave, and we left.'

Six years after its initial formation in 1991, the El Toco community was thus forcibly displaced and dispossessed of its land. Along with the campesinos of El Toco, many other communities were displaced during the paramilitary era in the Cesar region. Between 1997 and 2003, more than 57,000 people abandoned their homes, 3,100 were killed, and 374 were kidnapped in the area covered by the 6 central municipalities of the mining corridor of Cesar: La Jagua de Ibirico, El Paso, Becerril, Agustín Codazzi, San Diego and Chiriguaná (Moor & Van de Sandt, 2014).

10.2 Perpetrators: 'Everything that happened was for the land and the coal'

As described, violence has been present for most of Colombia's history, often driven by inequality and access to land. The intensity of violence increased in a period between 1948 and 1964, known as La Violencia ('Violence'). The two traditional political parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, engaged in a violent confrontation that caused the death of 200,000 people and forced displacement of more than 2 million people (Oquist, 1980). The struggle for land degenerated into a civil war from the 1960s onwards when insurgent groups including the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) emerged with a communist agenda and the aim to take power. The Colombian government tried unsuccessfully to challenge the rebels. Locally, tensions escalated between large landowners and insurgents as a consequence of extortion and kidnapping of landowners' family members. These tensions turned into violent disputes at the beginning of the 1980s with the creation of self-defence groups in rural areas that originally aimed to protect land property and challenge the rebel groups. The self-defence groups are known as paramilitary groups, which established a national confederation called the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC).[4]

While the paramilitaries emerged as self-defence groups aiming to protect land property, over time, they evolved from landowners' self-defence movements to regional organisations fighting for territorial control, production and transit of narcotics, and land dispossession. They switched from defensive to offensive strategies in the mid-1990s (Reyes Posada & Duica Amaja, 2009; Safford & Palacios, 2002).

One of the key elements that facilitated the rapid and strong expansion of paramilitary groups in Colombia was their tolerance by, and in some cases alliances with, local political elites and state forces (Gutiérrez Sanín & Barón, 2005). The emergent paramilitaries operated with clandestine cooperation from state forces against the guerrilla groups. This alignment manifested itself in alliances between the military and paramilitary squads, and between landlords and local politicians (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2003). Paramilitaries targeted campesino communities which emerged after the occupation of land. By targeting and displacing sectors of the rural population in Cesar, and in other regions of Colombia, paramilitaries gained control of the territory, appropriated and repopulated large areas of land, and implemented large-scale economic projects in association with private and public agents (Grajales, 2011; Salinas & Zamara, 2012; Vélez-Torres, 2014).

Insurgent groups in Cesar

While the campesinos of El Toco and other campesinos in Cesar established rural communities during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, the insurgent FARC and ELN were conquering the plains and mountainous areas of the region. In the context of civil wars, insurgent groups rely on civilian cooperation for their subsistence (Kalyvas, 2006; Gutiérrez

Sanín, 2008). Civilians, who in the case of rural areas of Colombia are mostly campesinos and large landowners, are a source of information, shelter, food, finances, and recruitment for rebels. Insurgents base their combat strategies on 'hit and hide' methods. They target military units or infrastructure and hide among the civilian population. Campesinos are therefore a key resource for insurgents and gaining their cooperation is one of their main objectives (Kalyvas, 2006). The guerrilla wars are characterised by problems of distinction, where state forces struggle to differentiate between campesinos and combatants.

In Cesar and other regions of Colombia, insurgents dominate local markets and the production of drugs, and create forms of governance over civilian populations (Arjona, 2016). They are also responsible for the killing and forced displacement of thousands of civilians, although to a much lesser degree than paramilitaries. The relationship between the insurgent FARC and the campesinos in Cesar is one of ruler and ruled, as one campesino of El Toco points out:

> *The guerrillas are in the mountains, we as campesinos are on our plots. But they come to our house with weapons. We have to show hospitality to those who arrived if we want to save our skin, we have to remain silent.*

The FARC's Front 41 was in charge of establishing networks with local campesinos in Cesar. In the first stage, insurgents organised meetings in rural hamlets and villages to explain their presence to rural civilians. A campesino present in one of those meetings remembers:

> *The guerrillas told us that their objective was to fight for justice in Colombia. There was a lot of difference between some who had a lot and others who did not. The idea was that we should all have the same. The land had to be distributed among the campesinos to be able to work.*

The FARC attempted to gain civilian cooperation in Cesar and other Caribbean regions by supporting land occupation (Jaccard & Molinares, 2016; Pérez, 2010). In several instances, the FARC infiltrated ongoing land occupation processes, and some campesino communities obtained property rights. Subsequently, the occupation of land during the period of paramilitary violence in Cesar became a source of information and identification for collective targeting by paramilitary groups, which concerns 'violence or threatened violence against members of a group because of membership in that group' (Steele, 2017, p. 25). Membership in a particular local group, such as campesinos, can be associated (by an armed group) with a particular political loyalty, for instance to the rival group, thereby branding the group and putting civilians at risk of being targeted.

Paramilitary groups in Cesar

The first paramilitary group in Cesar arrived in 1996. It was composed of 26 men who established a base in the rural area of the municipality of Augstín Codazzi. They conducted the 'wasp operation', where groups of ten men moved around the territory with specific military objectives, aiming to generate the perception among inhabitants of rural areas and insurgents that the paramilitaries were everywhere (Verdad Abierta, 2017).

A combination of different factors explains why the paramilitary groups targeted, killed, and displaced campesinos in this region. One is related to the presence of insurgent groups and their interaction with campesinos. The FARC and ELN controlled different areas of the Cesar region between 1985 and 1996. Campesino communities in Cesar occupied public land to obtain property rights. Insurgent groups had a strong agrarian reform agenda and supported

land occupations by landless campesinos. El Toco, like hundreds of other communities, emerged through the occupation of land in areas controlled by insurgent groups. When the paramilitary groups arrived in Cesar, they targeted these campesino communities for being suspected collaborators of the rebels. The former paramilitary Francisco Gaviria narrated in court the reasons for entering El Toco and displacing the community:

> *The people we killed there, according to Jorge 40, the information he gave us, was that they were the arm of the guerrillas, that they were guerrillas, the militias. (Office of the Attorney General of Colombia, 2011)*

Another factor explaining why paramilitaries targeted campesinos in Cesar concerns the expansion of large-scale coal extraction in the region. During the 1990s, Colombia became one of the world's leading exporters of coal. The Cesar region produces about 50 per cent of Colombian coal, almost all of which is exported, mostly to Europe (Moor & Van de Sandt, 2014). According to Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory, large landowners established alliances with paramilitary groups to forcibly appropriate, or 'grab', land from campesinos and then sell it to large multinational coal companies (Jaccard & Molinares, 2016).

A third factor concerns the alliances between paramilitary groups and large landowners in Cesar in the fight against insurgents. During the insurgent period in the region, landlords paid taxes to the rebels and many of them were kidnapped as a method of extortion. As in other regions in Colombia, landowners created associations with private armies to fight insurgents. Alliances between paramilitary groups and landowners led to the displacement of campesino communities and land dispossession (Gómez, 2018; Jaccard & Molinares, 2016). Alcides Mattos, a paramilitary ex-combatant, explains that the initial task of paramilitaries was to provide security to landowners: 'Our objective was to terminate those who were attacking landowners and businessmen. They paid us for security' (Verdad Abierta, 2010). However, Mattos also indicates that the outcome was to target the communities to obtain the land: 'You realise that everything that happened was for the land and the coal. There was a lot of money there' (Verdad Abierta, 2010).

After 1996, the FARC withdrew from the plains of Cesar while the number of paramilitary squads increased. The armed men killed rural community leaders to spread fear, and forced entire communities to leave their homes. In 1997, a local newspaper reported:

> *As if they owned the place, the private armed groups move from one place to another in Cesar, assaulting campesino villages or setting up roadblocks on the roads, and with a list in hand, they force defenceless citizens to descend from their vehicles or to get out of their homes and mercilessly kill them in public in front of everyone, or kill them on any road after being tortured and savagely humiliated. (El Diario Vallenato, 1997, p. 2)*

10.3 Victims: The loss of homes and land

The Colombian civil war has been harmful and damaging, especially to the rural population. An estimate by the governments' Victims Assistance Unit indicates that between 1985 and 2019, the violent conflict resulted in more than 8 million forcibly displaced people, more than 150,000 selective killings, 11,000 massacres, 30,000 kidnappings and nearly 25,000 forced disappearances (Victims Assistance Unit, 2020).

Marcela remembers that the day when the paramilitaries arrived in El Toco, the campesinos started to collect their things and to assess where to go:

> *I got nervous, we picked up the roof of the house [tin roof] and left. When I came out, I saw cars packed with stuff. I started crying. I was leaving in one of those trucks. I cannot get rid of that image of the cars carrying things and people on the road. That was very shocking.*

In Cesar, hundreds of campesinos left their homes and joined the over eight million people in Colombia who are internally displaced as a result of the armed conflict. Campesinos of El Toco fled to other regions of the country. Adelina was one of them, and migrated to the southern city of Neiva, eighteen hours by car from El Toco: 'There were many misfortunes that I suffered from this displacement. At first, I felt like everyone else, but then I went through a lot of humiliation. Things got darker and darker', she explains.

Pedro migrated to the city of Valledupar, three hours by car from El Toco. Pedro was in his house in El Toco when he heard shots. He got scared. He walked to the place where the noise was coming from and found his family alive. On that day, Pedro, his wife and their children left the property:

> *I left many apple trees in the plot, in 1997, when it was our turn to leave. We left without looking back because it was painful. How much I took care of my trees […] I left the hamlet and the watermelon crop, and I really like that fruit. The watermelon was green, and we had to leave it like that.*

In 1996, campesinos of El Toco already had a local school on their land and produced milk, watermelon, and plantain among other crops. The INCORA was in the process of legalising the occupation of land and providing land titles. Yet, in April 1997, the paramilitaries arrived in the land, killed the community leaders and forced campesinos to leave their homes. Campesinos of El Toco had to start a new life separated from their community. Between 1996 and 2005, the Caribbean Block of the paramilitary AUC controlled the sixteen square kilometres of El Toco, the region of Cesar and several other provinces of Colombia. Campesinos of El Toco did not have any other option but to settle somewhere else and wait. Fear and pressure by paramilitaries forced campesinos not only to flee their homes but also to sell their land possession or property (Gómez, 2018). An estimate indicates that between 1996 and 2003, paramilitaries dispossessed more than 500 campesino families over 180 square kilometres in the mining corridor of Cesar (Bernal, 2004). Some of the areas were occupied by paramilitary-loyal new settlers and large portions of land were purchased by multinational coal companies (El Tiempo, 2018; Jaccard & Molinares, 2016; Moor & Van de Sandt, 2014; Verdad Abierta, 2018).

The paramilitary AUC was demobilised between 2003 and 2006 under the administration of Álvaro Uribe. In 2006, 600 paramilitaries of the Juan Andrés Alvaréz Front demobilised in the Cesar mining region following a deal with the Colombian government. The campesinos displaced during paramilitary control attempted to return to the land, only to find new occupants. In 2011, the Colombian government implemented the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448), which seeks to return the land to campesinos who were dispossessed during the armed conflict. Between 2011 and 2016, the Land Restitution Unit received more than 100,000 restitution requests nation-wide (Land Restitution Unit [URT], 2016). Cesar is the region with the second-largest number of

restitution requests after Antioquia, with more than 7,000 cases (URT, 2016). Today, Cesar is the site of judicial disputes between campesinos for access to and ownership of land which was dispossessed during the period of paramilitary control (Gómez, 2018).

10.4 Significance: Civilian harm in the struggle for land

The case of the campesinos of El Toco is one of many in which paramilitary groups dispossessed campesinos of their land for strategic and economic purposes. The former director of the State Office for Land Restitution (Land Restitution Unit) in Cesar, Jorge Chávez, indicates that: 'In Cesar, large landowners ended up appropriating public land that was intended to be given to campesinos.' Land disputes remain the central point of contention in Cesar and for the campesinos of El Toco. Land occupation was the driver of community formation but the communities are also a target for forced displacement. In the context of land occupation and membership of campesino communities, displacement of civilians is one of the strategic methods used by paramilitary groups to conquer territories and obtain land.

Currently, displaced civilian communities attempt to return to the land from which they were expelled. The intention of the displaced communities is not only to acquire property rights over the land they once occupied, but to re-establish the community ties which were broken with the arrival of the paramilitaries in 1997.

Already in 2008, the campesinos of El Toco created the Community Association of Campesinos of El Toco (Asocomparto), with the intention to initiate institutional and judicial processes to get the land back. In this way, the campesinos could collectively pursue land restitution through the formation of associations, instead of going through these complex processes individually. In addition, Asocomparto was able to create new relationships with groups of lawyers, human rights organisations and non-governmental organisations. Other campesino Community Councils in Cesar, representing forcibly displaced communities, have joined Asocomparto, creating the Cesar Campesino Assembly for Land Restitution and Good Living. However, successful land restitution has proven difficult, and is hindered by laws that complicate collective restitution; thousands of families from the Cesar region are fighting to this day for the return of their communities.

Understanding how paramilitaries harm rural civilians and the violent methods used to produce their displacement is relevant in order to better anticipate when and where rural communities become a target. It also helps to uncover how land disputes lead to prolonged and frequent targeting of rural communities living on the crossroads of civil war. Building peace in Colombia requires further reflection upon how campesinos are strategically used by armed groups – but also how they can develop resilience, organisation, and paths to reconciliation.

Images

A fisherman at work. In the background, Santa Marta's coal terminal from where coal is loaded onto cargo ships to make its way to ports around the world.

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On the left, a member of the El Toco community who was murdered by paramilitary forces in April 1997, the same month this photo was shot.

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Endnotes

1 All interviews were conducted in Spanish by the author during fieldwork between 2016 and 2019, unless indicated otherwise.

2 PAX does a lot of work in Colombia relating to forced displacement, post-conflict resolution, and exploring the relationships between mineral exploitation and violence. For more information, see the PAX website.

3 Pseudonyms are assigned to interviewees to protect their identity. Pseudonyms are indicated by attribution to stand-alone first names. Those who appear with both first and last names provided their testimonies in public hearings and their names have not been changed.

4 Between 2003 and 2006, 31,000 paramilitary combatants demobilised under the Peace and Justice Law. In 2017, more than 6,000 individuals demobilised after a peace deal between the insurgent FARC and the Colombian government.