

## *Colombia: Peace Community of San José de Apartadó*

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The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó in Colombia was formed on 23 of March 1997. The town of San José and its agricultural hinterlands are located in the mountainous zones in the region of Urabá, infamous even within Colombia for its violence and instability. The Community is defined by its strict internal regulations: not to take any part in the armed conflict, not to pass information to or aid any belligerent groups, not to grow coca; a commitment to engage in communal work.

In their own telling of their history, the Peace Community remembers the massacre of eight peasant farmers by the Colombian National Army in July 1977, the victims of whose families now populate the Peace Community. 20 years after this massacre, the Peace Community was formed in an attempt to remain on their lands and make a principled stand against the violence engulfing Colombia in the 1990s. September of 1996 saw another massacre, and in January 1997 over 800 people were forcibly displaced from their homes. Another massacre happened in February 1997, and the following month the Peace Community formed.

The Peace Community's settlements lie at a point of strategic and economic interest – close to the Caribbean coast, and the main weapons and drug trafficking routes to the United States and Europe, and on fertile and productive land in an area with little state presence – perfect for growing coca. The violence that surrounds the Community is a fight for control of the land they live on. The violence across Colombia stems from a continuing battle for control for this – not only results in the control of its resources, but also results in social and political control.

This is why the Peace Community is such an emblematic case of social resistance in Colombia. In forming a pacifist zone they have renounced the culture of violence as a means to power and championed neutrality. In embracing communal work they have renounced individualism and profiteering and replaced it with community values, kinship, and respect for the land.

### **The cost of peace in a war zone**

The land is fought over by three armed groups – the Colombian Army, paramilitary groups (often working hand in hand with the state military), and the guerilla army Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Each of these groups have been responsible for the assassination of Peace Community members, though the majority of killings have come at the hands of Army and Paramilitary groups.

Over 200 members of the Community have been killed in the years since 1997, and as of 2014, only two cases out of the more than 900 human rights violations recorded and documented by the Community have been brought to

court. Today the membership of the Community stands at about 600 people.

The history of the Peace Community is a history of peaceful and dignified resistance in the face of brutality, and over time has resulted in truly impressive victories for the Community, not least the fact they remain on their land and on their farms.

### **Nonviolent resistance to the culture of war**

The internal rules of the community, whether consciously or not, are a rejection of the basic political economy of a peripheral conflict zone like Urabá, a political economy jealously protected and enforced by those it has raised to power. It rejects the use of violence as a legitimate mode of power; it rejects coca; it embraces communal work as an economic model. It is a representative democracy. It emphasises localism, self-sustainability, and community organisation, connection to the land and rejection of displacement. Its members stand and all too often die on their principals.

Over time, the Peace Community has developed a number of forms of non-violent resistance and intervention to counter the various threats they (and their way of life) face. Every week, a day is put aside for communal work. This might be to help an individual community member, or to work on lands held in common – each Peace Community settlement splits into work groups, led by elected leaders, to work. Occasionally, for large projects, like improving the path that leads to the various villages, the whole Community will work as one work group.

One form of resistance is to publicly record the challenges and violence the Community faces. They make regular public statements, put out by the Communities Internal Council, which are put on the internet and record publicly the challenges they have faced. For example, if an army battalion has camped on their land, if paramilitary groups have tried to threaten or bribe a Community member into making false accusation, or if a member has been kidnapped or their home invaded. By making these public statements they not only publicise their work and their world, but keep a publicly available record – which are used by other activists to advocate change and maintain the transparency of the Community's activities and ward off unjust accusations.

The Community elects the Internal Council once a year at one of the bi-annual assemblies of the entire populace. They meet weekly, and discuss the current situation, problems facing the Community internally and externally, and strategic direction. They also serve as the management for the communally held land and resources, unless a task (for example managing the cacao crop) has been specifically delegated. The Internal Council members are the public face of the Community, and face a high personal risk. Nonetheless, they do speaking tours and attend meetings with officials outside of the Community.

These regular structures, of elections, public communication, and communal work provide the structure and strength of the Community on a day-to-day basis, and also provide the basis for the strategies used in times of emergency.

If a Community member is harassed, or threatened, or attacked, a response is made by the whole Community, led by the Internal Council. In addition to the

publicly made denouncement in the regular reports, a group of Community members, often with international accompaniment, may confront an armed group and request the release of a member, or complain about recent actions (as the case may be).

In 2013, the nearby areas of Rodoxali and Sabaleta – not Peace Community villages – were seeing a huge incursion of paramilitary forces, forcing people from their homes, forcefully recruiting young men, and “disappearing” others. The Peace Community organised a week-long “pilgrimage”, where a group of over 100 people, including outside allies such as journalists, lawyers, and international accompaniers, went to these areas in search of the paramilitary groups in order to request the lands and lives of their neighbours was respected. The paramilitary groups avoided the meeting, hiding from the pilgrimage group, but the message was clear and paramilitary activity did drop off in these areas. The courage of the people, going unarmed to confront a armed group which had repeatedly committed massacres against the Community, killing family members and making public threats, cannot be underestimated.

Internal difficulties – for example if someone has misused Community funds – are dealt with strictly, and people have been asked to leave the Community in order to maintain unity and ensure the Community cannot be accused of breaking its own rules.

The Peace Community has remained steadfast in its stand against violence and terror. They have expanded their community lands, and developed effective methods of communal work for the good of the community. They set up the Farmers University, which invites similar communities from around Colombia to meet in the Peace Community and share technologies and strategies. They set up Humanitarian Zones, where any one, regardless of whether they are a member or not, can take refuge from the regular and fierce battles that rage between the three armed groups around their villages. Their democratic structure and vision has seen the Community grow out of their home Department of Antioquia, into neighbouring Cordoba, and onto the national conscious.

### **International presence and support**

Since its formation, the Peace Community has had the support of civil society groups both Colombian and international. They have had international support, from organisations around the world. The Fellowship of Reconciliation Colombia Program (now FOR Peace Presence) has lived with the Community of La Union since 2002, and accompany Community members in their daily lives to make violent reprisals less likely. Among others, Peace Brigades International and Operazione Colomba accompany the Peace Community throughout the year, providing both physical and political accompaniment to improve the security of this inspiring organisation.

### **Success of nonviolent resistance**

Gains have been made. There has not been a serious massacre since the fall-out of 2005. The UN Human Rights Council has investigated the abuses committed



SAN JOSÉ DE APARTADÓ, COLOMBIA. COFFINS PROCESSION.

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against the community. In July 2012, the Colombian Constitutional Court ordered the Colombian President's Office to retract the statements it had made and apologise to the Peace Community – which President Santos did in December of 2013. It also ordered the establishment of channels of direct communication between the government and the Peace Community, and the founding of a Commission of Evaluation and Justice – these steps have not yet been taken.

Since formation the leadership of the Peace Community has been targeted for assassination and harassment, many have died, and many have been forced into hiding. Yet the Peace Community continues, now in its second generation, as a self sustaining and democratic unit standing firm on its principals of non-violence, communal work, and the right to land.

The Peace Community belongs to one of the most vulnerable groups in Colombia: peasant farmers. With over five million forcibly displaced people (worldwide Colombia is the country with the highest number of internal refugees) it is clear that the fight over land is one of the main reasons of the on-going armed conflict in Colombia. That the Peace Community has stood up for its rights, in a nonviolent manner under such attacks for so long is inspirational, and makes them a leading light in the fight for a peaceful, more just, Colombia.

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