

RECLAIMING LAND AND LIFE IN COLOMBIA

by Moira Birss

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One of the stories that does not tend to make it into the news articles about Colombia's armed conflict is that of internal displacement. Over 4 million Colombians have been internally displaced – and countless killed – due to the country's armed conflict, which has spanned over nearly five decades and multiple administrations. Many of these desplazados (displaced people) are peasant farmers or indigenous who flee their rural homes to seek refuge in nearby towns. However, the violence follows them there, and they must flee to the far-away cities of Medellín or Bogotá, where their likely future is a life of misery living in the shantytowns that grow daily on the outskirts of Colombia's biggest cities. Despite the potentially bleak future awaiting Colombia's millions of displaced people, there is an effort afoot to reverse the flow of campesinos (peasant farmers) away from their land. In the department of Antioquia, for example, the Antioquian Campesino Association (ACA) is helping campesinos return to and reclaim the lands from which they were violently displaced. These returns are made possible by international accompaniment, including that of FOR USA's Colombia Program.



International accompaniment provides non-interventionist a way for internationals to demonstrate solidarity for the peace and justice work of local communities and organizations. International accompaniment works because it reduces risk of attack, both due to the immediate shaming and intimidating effects of the presence of a “high-status” outsider and the political pressure that the accompanier, connected to an international network, can bring to bear against the aggressor. Accompaniment is also an encouragement and a show of solidarity with the accompanied community or organization. In a context like Colombia's, international accompaniment is an important tool for opening the political space for Colombian communities and organizations to continue their courageous work for peace and justice.

One such community of displaced campesinos that the ACA works with hails from a rural area known as Angelópolis, a combined 3-hour bumpy bus ride and dusty hike from Medellín. The community displaced in 2000 after four area men were killed, and most had moved to a shantytown in the hills surrounding Medellín. In 2007, with the accompaniment of volunteers from the FOR USA Colombia Program, some of the families, supported by the ACA, began to make visits to their former land in preparation for a return. Now, two and a half years later, five families have new homes and are preparing for the return of even more families.

For the ACA, a return does not just mean going back to one's land; that's just the first step in the process. Living conditions must be assured, because during displacement, one's house might have been destroyed – either by weather and disuse or from the sacking of an armed actor. Agricultural production possibilities must be sustainably developed, so that the campesinos can maintain a productive and sustainable life. The ACA's requirements for a successful return are the following principals: dignity, security, sustainability, and that the return be voluntary.

This is in contrast to the government-sponsored returns, which in many cases don't provide any of those four requirements. According to Nicolás Castrillón, coordinator of the ACA, the government often sponsors returns so it can say it has done so, but without working with the communities to develop

long-term sustainable living and working conditions. As Nicolás explains, “The law says that to return is to go back in conditions equal or better than before the displacement. Part of that is reconstructing the social fabric.”



On a recent visit to Angelópolis, I saw fields of plantains, yucca, coffee and cocoa planted, spiffy new houses with running water and electricity lines awaiting the breaker switch to be flicked. Octavio, the widowed patriarch of the group, served us plantains in multiple forms over our three and a half days there. Octavio is content to be back, but criticizes the way he sees the government glossing over the suffering of Colombia’s civilian population. “[President] Uribe says that there isn’t war. But there is. There is a war of weapons, a war of hunger, a war of misery,” says Octavio.

Community organizing is difficult enough; put it in the setting of an armed conflict and it’s near impossible. But the ACA, with the support of international accompaniment, is doing just that, and stemming the flow of displacement and land concentration that Colombia’s conflict continues to generate.

The FOR USA Colombia Program provides international accompaniment to the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado, the Antioquian Peasant Association, and the Medellin Youth Network. The Program also works in coalition with U.S. and Colombian organizations to oppose U.S. military aid and base usage in Colombia, and informs the public about Colombian peace initiatives via its website, www.forcolombia.org.

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