THE RIGHT TO SPEAK:
The Life and Work of Nancy Sánchez of Colombia

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – Nancy Sánchez

A journalist by training, Nancy Sánchez has been documenting human rights abuses and the survival strategies of everyday women and men for over two decades in the more than 40-year-long conflict in Colombia.

Her work has taken her to remote and dangerous regions of the country: first to Magdalena Medio in the north and later Putumayo in the south. In the early 1990s, it was in one organization that Sánchez found her vocation. She states, "Everything I am and everything I have done in human rights I owe to what I learned in CREDHOS" — the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights.

In the countryside of Magdalena Medio, she and her colleagues witnessed the scorched earth campaign being carried out by the military, while in the main city of Barrancabermeja, paramilitaries were committing massacres against civilians. Among other documentation, Sánchez and her five colleagues in the committee recorded unidentified bodies, many of whom had been tortured, in the morgue. The archive became the only way people could find their disappeared loved ones. Their courage to speak out came at a tragic price: Three of Sánchez's five fellow committee members were assassinated.

With the threat of death so near, Sánchez moved first to the capital of Bogotá and then to the Putumayo region, an epicenter of political violence and the illicit drug trade. She and a Catholic priest, Father Alcides Jiménez, worked closely with local leaders to highlight the effects of the war on the communities, until, again, Sánchez lost a colleague to the war. Father Alcides was killed by the rebel group the FARC, in front of his parishioners during Mass. But she continued her human rights work as the U.S.-funded Plan Colombia was implemented in the region, when indiscriminate aerial fumigations of coca crops caused massive public health problems and devastation as people lost their livelihoods. Her vigilant monitoring of human rights abuses resulted in death threats and she was forced to flee the country.

Upon her return in 2003, she began work with Asociación MINGA, a human rights organization, again in Putumayo — but this time primarily with women. She and her colleagues traveled "on horseback, on motorcycles, in canoes and in jeeps, on unpaved roads, over mountains and through jungles" to meet with women in remote areas to hear their stories of the conflict and offer workshops on human rights.

Sánchez's work has been recognized internationally with several human rights awards, and for U.S. citizens her reports and investigations offer a window to a poorly understood conflict where so much U.S. funding has been spent.

"My 20 years of experience as a human rights defender in various regions has given me the experience to assert that there is a great potential for women to transform their reality. … The struggle for life is in the hands of women."

CONFLICT HISTORY — Colombia

For almost half a century Colombia has been plagued by an internal armed conflict between rebel groups, paramilitaries, state security forces and drug lords.[2] Colombian civilians have lived in the crossfire, with the conflict causing the displacement of over 5 million people, approximately 51,000 disappearances, the recruitment of up to 14,000 children and minors into armed groups, and an untold number of deaths.

Violence in Colombia, a country with an estimated population of 46.9 million people, has a history that runs deep. The assassination of liberal political leader Jose Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 pushed the country into a 12-year period known as *La Violencia*. During this partisan conflict that ravaged the Colombian countryside, at least 200,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands were displaced.

The contemporary armed conflict has its origins in historic inequities, land tenancy disputes and the inheritance of political and social conflict from La Violencia. An agreement between the liberal and conservative parties to alternate power temporarily reduced the violence. However, it also brought about the emergence of left-wing groups that, feeling excluded from the political process, resorted to armed opposition in the mid-1960s.

In 1966 the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) was officially founded, after having announced the start of an armed struggle two years earlier. The National Liberation Army, ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) was formed in the same period. In the 1970s several other guerrilla groups were formed, including the Popular Liberation Army, EPL (*Ejército Popular de Liberación*) and M-19 (*Movimiento 19 de Abril*), each with its own strategy and ideology.

Initially, these guerrilla groups sought to change the exclusion, inequity and injustice that they felt characterized the political system. Over time, however, the drivers of conflict changed and the number of armed actors involved multiplied. In the 1980s the rebel groups grew in strength through profitable kidnappings, extortion and "war taxes" extracted from the oil industry, land owners and drug traffickers. In response, land owners and drug traffickers started their own paramilitary groups, which developed close ties with the Colombian military and local politicians. The activities of such private armies were not limited to fighting the guerrillas, but also included one-sided violence and other human rights violations against civilians. The income derived from the drug traffic and kidnappings granted them more and more independence from the state, and in 1995 many of the then-existing paramilitary self-defense groups joined forces and founded the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), or the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia.

Transnational networks and international policy have also influenced the Colombian conflict, while at the same time the violence has affected and spilled over to Colombia's neighboring countries: Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, Venezuela and Panama. Colombia's geographical position as the "gateway to South America" has fostered the traffic of illegal goods, and armed groups use the border regions as their base and to manage trafficking routes, while civilians cross borders in search

of a safe haven. This has led to constantly changing and often tense regional relations. United States policy and financial aid has also significantly influenced the armed conflict in Colombia.

Some attempts have been made by subsequent governments in Colombia to negotiate peace and to establish countrywide legitimate authority, but these efforts have had mixed results. President Andrés Pastrana, elected in 1998, granted the FARC a free zone to enable peace negotiations and, in 2000, launched the highly controversial Plan Colombia to fight coca cultivation, drug trafficking and rebels that benefit from the trade. To support these efforts, and to halt the flow of cocaine and heroin entering the United States over its border with Mexico, the United States invested a total of $7 billion in Plan Colombia between 2000 and 2010. The aerial fumigations of coca crops that were a part of this strategy have led to severe public health problems and the destruction of livelihoods. The peace talks Pastrana initiated ultimately failed in 2002, helping Álvaro Uribe — who proposed to defeat the FARC by military means — to power.

The Uribe government implemented the Democratic Security Policy, strengthening the formal security sector and creating peasant militias and informant networks. In 2003 a demobilization process of the AUC began, resulting in 31,000 demobilized paramilitaries and, in 2006, the end of their formal organization. However, paramilitaries remain active in the many criminal and paramilitary successor groups. Although significant gains were made as the government stepped up efforts to regain control throughout the country, it has failed to address the underlying causes of the conflict or to break the insurgents' will. While guerrilla groups have suffered significant losses over the last 10 years, and they lack the military and popular support necessary to overthrow the government, the rebels continue attacks against civilians and large areas of the countryside are still under their influence.

Thus, violence between various armed groups continues and still affects the majority of Colombians — especially Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations — beyond the major cities. Recent years have been characterized by continuing human rights violations by the Colombian military, the harassment of human rights activists by different parties, impunity (including for paramilitaries and perpetrators of sexual violence), landmine violence, armed stoppages and large-scale displacement. Between 1997 and 2011 nearly 5 million Colombians were displaced, now often living under inhumane conditions in the major cities. The country also has one of the highest levels of forced disappearances in the world.

In 2011 President Juan Manuel Santos, elected the previous year, signed Colombia's Victims and Land Restitution Law, aimed at compensating the conflict's victims and returning land to the millions of displaced people. A peace process was announced in 2012, after the Santos administration and the FARC had established a framework for the negotiations. While hope exists that decades of violence will finally be brought to an end, skepticism remains widespread, and critics point to the importance of including civil society (especially women) in the process to be able to come to a sustainable agreement that reflects the needs of the population and resolves the root causes of the violence.

Over the decades, the armed conflict has manifested in a variety of ways on the regional and local level, depending on historical, geographical, economic, political and social dynamics and characteristics of the area.

The Armed Conflict and Political Violence in Magdalena Medio

The Magdalena Medio region, north of Bogotá, consists of 29 mostly rural municipalities divided over five departments that surround the Magdalena River in the valley between the Andes. Barrancabermeja, its unofficial capital, is an oil refinery town in the department of Santander. It is a diverse region where descendants of slaves, a mestizo peasant population, cattle ranchers, agribusiness owners, petroleum workers and people from various parts of the country came to seek their fortune. Although the region is rich in natural resources, including gold, emeralds, tropical woods and substantial oil deposits, income distribution is uneven. Roughly 70 percent of the population of 811,000 lives below the poverty line (compared to 45 percent in Colombia as a whole).

A high concentration of land and capital has, historically, been in the hands of the few — the main reason for the region's social unrest and armed conflict. Magdalena Medio has never had a strong state presence, as evidenced in the lack of social programs and basic services. These precarious circumstances, and peasants trying to change them, account for the long history of strong social mobilization and resistance. For decades, Barrancabermeja was known as the center of radical politics. In the aftermath of the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, marked by rebellions and protests across the country, it was the only city where a popular government resisted and survived.

It is also home to what has long been the country's largest and most militant workers' union, *Unión Sindical Obrera*. Furthermore, guerrilla groups such as the ELN — which started its armed struggle in Magdalena Medio and adjacent regions — as well as the FARC and other splinter groups, were active in the town for many years.

The history of civic opposition and guerrilla operations has led to a decades-long military campaign against these guerrillas as well as peasant settlers, who mobilized through Communal Action Councils and the National Association of Peasants to fight for their right to land. The repressive actions of the state and paramilitary groups thwarted the capacity of these civilian sociopolitical organizations. The military treated the peasants as potential guerrillas and adopted a "take the water from the fish" approach — that is, eliminating the medium (the peasants) in which the subjects (the guerrilla) lived. This policy resulted in arbitrary detentions, torture, aerial bombardments of communities, disappearances and extrajudicial executions of civilians (presented as "guerrillas killed in combat") — under the pretense of restoring order.

Paramilitary groups appeared in the area following the military operations in order to consolidate, through terror, the rule of law. The paramilitary groups started in Puerto Boyacá in 1982 under the name "Death to Kidnappers," or *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS). Its initial objective was to join forces with the army to combat subversive groups, but in practice this resulted in brutal repression of peasants and urban communities. With the help of *sicarios* (hired assassins), MAS systematically and selectively targeted all those critical of the state.

Despite an ambitious regional peace and development program initiated in 1995[3] and the demobilization process that started in 2003, poverty and violence are still rife. In 2011 over 145 people were selectively assassinated in Barrancabermeja, and paramilitaries continue to exert economic, political and social control.

Plan Colombia and the Armed Conflict in Putumayo

The Department of Putumayo covers about 9,608 square miles between the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers, bordering the Republic of Ecuador to the south. It is divided into three sub-regions: Lower, Middle and Upper Putumayo, each region comprising several municipalities. The department has a population of over 326,000, with roughly 59 percent living in rural areas. Although an important center for the exploitation of oil reserves, and harboring great natural and ecological diversity, Putumayo — and Lower Putumayo in particular — is marked by extreme poverty and precarious living conditions.

The lucrative coca crop was introduced in the region in 1980, drawing many poverty-stricken peasants into its cultivation and providing them with a means of subsistence. The FARC arrived in 1984 and established territorial and social control over this strategic border area, obtaining a pivotal role in the booming drug trade. When in 1998 the paramilitaries began to arrive in Putumayo, the two armed groups began to compete for territory, control over the coca market, and the power to collect illegal taxes from the local population.

The large-scale coca cultivation and drug trafficking, the presence of the guerrillas, and its strategic location made Putumayo an ideal setting for the implementation of Plan Colombia; the department became the central focus of the plan's initial military offensive known as "Push into the South." Plan Colombia brought indiscriminate fumigations, causing massive health problems and devastation of the communities' main source of subsistence. It also instigated the militarization of the area and the repression of social and civic movements. This military offensive produced significant losses for the FARC and drove the guerillas into rural areas and the jungle. But no operations were carried out against the paramilitary groups, which were also known to have links to drug trafficking. Instead, a dangerous alliance developed between the military and the paramilitary, made worse by rampant impunity.

Twelve years after the beginning of Plan Colombia, Putumayo continues to be an epicenter of the conflict in Colombia. The FARC commits hostile actions against the population, such as assassinations, threats, forced recruitment, armed blockages and sabotage of energy supplies and infrastructure. Paramilitaries have carried out massacres, assassinations, torture and the forced disappearances of thousands of people (Putumayo has one of the highest levels of forced disappearances). The military abuses human rights and carries out extrajudicial executions while threatening and stigmatizing the local population. These factors, combined with massive aerial fumigations, have created a grave humanitarian crisis in Putumayo, making displacement an ongoing problem. The rate of internal displacement has reached nearly eight times the national average, and between 2000 and 2012, the department lost 150,000 people to forced displacement.

Thus, as all eyes are set on the peace negotiations on the national level, fighting in Putumayo's countryside continues and its population still lives in the crossfire between guerrillas, paramilitaries and the security forces.

MAP — Colombia

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Colombia and *Personal History of Nancy Sánchez*

1525 Spain begins conquest of Colombia.

1810 – 1824 Colombia's war for independence. Present-day Colombia emerges from Spanish colonialism as part of the Republic of New Granada (which includes the contemporary nations of Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama).

Ca. 1850 Liberal and conservative parties crystalize following intermittent civil wars, fought over, among other issues, the pace and degree of liberal reform.

1861 – 1885 The liberal party rules, and the country is divided into nine largely autonomous entities and the church is separated from the state.

1886 – 1900 The period of conservative governments known as Regeneration is marked by the severe limitation of liberal participation in government. Power is recentralized and church influence restored.

1899 – 1902 War of the Thousand Days. The civil war results in over 100,000 deaths in a total population of 4 million.

1930 A liberal president is elected by coalition, introducing social legislation and encouraging trade unions.

1933 ***Nancy's father is born in Ambato, Ecuador.***

1943 ***Nancy's mother is born in Guaca, Province of Santander, Colombia.***

1946 Conservatives return to power.

1948 Assassination of left-wing liberal party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Riots erupt in Bogotá and violence soon spreads across the country. It is the beginning of *La Violencia*, a 12-year period of violence during which at least 200,000 people are killed.

1958 The conservative and liberal parties agree to a 16-year coalition government, National Front, excluding and banning other political actors.

Mid-1960s Several left-wing groups start armed struggles against the government.

1965 The leftist National Liberation Army (*Ejército Liberación Nacional*, or ELN) and the People's Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación*, or EPL) are founded.

1966 After a formation period of two years, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC), is officially founded.

1967 ***Nancy's brother Walter is born.***

1968 ***September 27 — Nancy Sánchez Méndez is born in Bucaramanga, Santander, Colombia.***

1971 The left-wing guerrilla group M-19 emerges, which operates in the urban areas.

1975 ***Nancy's sister Geny is born.***

1978 – 1982 Julio César Turbay Ayala is head of the government. Turbay introduces the National Security Statute, eroding civil rights, while expanding the arrest powers of the armed forces and placing punishment for a variety of crimes under the jurisdiction of military tribunals. Torture, extrajudicial executions and assassinations of members of the political left follow.

1980 The coca crop is introduced in Putumayo — the start of its large-scale cultivation in the department.

1981 The paramilitary group "Death to Kidnappers," or *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS), is founded by the military, paramilitaries and drug cartels.

1982 – 1986 Conservative Belisario Betancur Cuartas is head of the government. He is the first to propose peace negotiations and a ceasefire with the guerrillas. He grants amnesty to guerrillas and frees political prisoners.

1982 – 1986 ***Nancy attends* Colegio Nuestra Señora del Rosario Lagos del Cacique*, a high school run by nuns.***

1985 November 6 — The Justice Palace is taken over by the guerrilla group M-19. Eleven judges and 90 other people are killed by M-19 and the military. The Patriotic Union Party (UP) is founded.

1980s – 1990s Security forces carry out a social cleansing campaign in Bucaramanga.

1986 – 1990 Liberal Virgilio Barco Vargas is head of the government. Barco pursues negotiations with guerrillas and, beginning in 1988, engages in a bloody war against the drug mafia. Right-wing paramilitary groups begin a murder campaign against UP politicians, amid continuing violence by left-wing groups and death squads run by drugs cartels.

1987 – 1992 ***Nancy studies journalism at the Autonomous University of Bucaramanga (*Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga*).***

1989 M-19 becomes a legal party after a peace agreement with the government.

1990 ***Nancy and her family move out of the hotel where they lived during most of her childhood.***

February 26 — Three leaders of the Association of Peasant Workers of Carare (*Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare*, or ATCC) — a peasant organization promoting a visionary peace proposal — and the famous war correspondent Silvia Duzán are assassinated.

Liberal President César Gaviria Trujillo is elected following a bloody campaign that included the assassination of three presidential candidates.

1991 – 1992 ***Nancy does an internship and works at the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (*Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*, or CREDHOS) in Barrancabermeja.***

1991 March — HH, a member of CREDHOS, is killed.

August — Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, the president of CREDHOS, is forced to leave Colombia after repeated threats.

October — Gómez receives the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C.

1992 January 28 — Gómez's article "Colombian Drugs, U.S. Guns" is published in the *New York Times*.

January 29 — Blanca Valero de Durán, secretary of CREDHOS, is assassinated.

June 10 — Nancy survives an armed attack on the vehicles in which she and two other CREDHOS members, Jorge Gómez Lizarazo and Pablo Arenas, were traveling.

June 28 — Another member of CREDHOS, Julio César Nerrío Villegas, is shot dead.

1993 Medellín drug cartel leader Pablo Escobar is shot dead.

Nancy works with CINEP (*Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular*) in Bogotá.

Nancy's grandmother dies.

1994 – 1995 ***As a member of CINEP, Nancy works at the Human Rights Committee of Putumayo (*Comité de Derechos Humanos del Putumayo*) in Puerto Asís,***

Putumayo. She meets Father Alcides Jiménez.

1995 – 2001 ***While living in Mocoa, Nancy works for the Health Department of Putumayo and the Governor's Office of the Putumayo Department as a journalist and coordinator of the program "Peaceful Coexistence in Putumayo".***

1996 *Marchas Campesinas* takes place. It was a large demonstration of coca peasants in Putumayo against fumigations, which were already taking place in other departments. The demonstration was led by Putumayo Regional Civic Movement (*Movimiento Cívico Campesino del Putumayo*), which proposed an alternative plan for economic conversion and social investment in the region. ***Nancy participates in the negotiations between the government and leaders of the Marchas Campesinas.***

1996 – 1997 ***Nancy helps in the creation of the Network of Trainers for Peace in Putumayo (*****La Red de Formadores para la Paz en el Putumayo*****.)***

1998 ***Nancy is appointed to Asociación MINGA's Board of Directors by Gloria Flórez, the director of the organization.***

Andres Pastrana Arango is elected president and begins peace talks with the guerrillas at San Vicente de Caguán.

Paramilitary groups of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, or AUC) arrive in Putumayo, initially in Puerto Asís, installing their principal base next to the primary military base of the department. They commit numerous homicides in the urban areas.

Civic and peasant movements initiate a march to Bogotá and a takeover of the presidency of the Republic of Colombia.

September 11 — Father Alcides Jiménez is killed by the FARC while offering a Mass for peace.

November — Pastrana grants FARC a safe haven in the southeast of the country to help move peace talks along.

1999 January 9 — A massacre in El Tigre, Valle de Guamuéz, Putumayo, marks the start of paramilitary expansion in Lower Putumayo through terror: massacres, killings and forced disappearances.

2000 Pastrana introduces "Plan Colombia," which secures almost $1 billion in mainly military aid from the United States to fight drug trafficking and rebels who profit and protect the trade. It brings militarization and indiscriminate fumigations, with a profound impact on public health, the environment and the small-scale peasant

economy. Putumayo is one of Colombia's most affected departments.

2000 – 2001 ***Nancy travels to Costa Rica to attend the Colombian peace talks, after having left Putumayo in an ambulance during an armed shutdown by the guerrilla. In this meeting she meets many influential people and organizations whom she continues to work with to bring attention to the situation in Putumayo.***

Nancy accompanies various international delegations to Putumayo, including U.S. nongovernmental organizations (Center for International Policy, Institute for Policy Studies, Witness for Peace, Washington Office on Latin America, Colombian Human Rights Committee) and the CBS television program "60 Minutes." This has a great impact on public opinion about the fumigations and the consequences of Plan Colombia.

2001 ***Nancy and Gloria Flórez organize a large demonstration in Putumayo against Plan Colombia.***

2001 – 2002 ***Nancy is forced to leave Colombia. With the help of Amnesty International, she goes to Lyon, France, to study for one year.***

2002 ***Nancy returns to Putumayo, where she coordinates a project of integrated farms with peasants in Lower Putumayo. The project is through Javeriana University.***

Pastrana breaks off three years of peace talks with FARC rebels. The government declares the south of the country a warzone after guerrillas step up their attacks.

President Álvaro Uribe is elected president after a campaign in which he promises to crack down on rebel groups. His government initiates the Democratic Security Policy, a long-term and comprehensive security strategy involving, among other things, the strengthening of the formal security sector.

2003 – 2006 There is a lengthy and complex disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process of paramilitary groups of the AUC, under the Uribe government.

2003 ***Nancy starts working for MINGA as a staff member in charge of the southern region of Putumayo.***

Nancy and Gloria organize another demonstration in Putumayo against Plan Colombia.

October — Nancy receives the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies.

November — Nancy helps organize a demonstration in Putumayo

coordinated by* Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*. Over 3,500 women from all over the country break the silence about the effects of the fumigations and the armed conflict in Putumayo. The idea to create a network of women in Putumayo is born.

2005 Constant armed stoppages by the FARC and military offensives make it the worst year of the armed conflict in Putumayo.

The Women's Alliance of Putumayo is officially founded, with Nancy working with them from the beginning. The alliance has its first meeting in La Cocha.

July 22 — President Uribe signs the Justice and Peace Law, which regulates the procedures for demobilized members of illegal armed groups who had been excluded from the existing amnesty procedures. It establishes benefits based on their contribution to justice and reparations.

2006 President Uribe wins a second term in office.

2007 ***With the Women's Alliance Nancy conducts research on the experiences of women in urban areas of Putumayo.***

2007 – 2008 ***August to January — Nancy is an Oak Fellow at the Oak Institute for International Human Rights, based at Colby College in the United States.***

2008 ***With a delegation of eight women and indigenous human rights defenders, Nancy presents on "Human Rights in Colombia: The Continuing Crisis in Putumayo" to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, formerly the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, in Washington, D.C.***

Nancy's father moves to his birthplace of Ambato in Ecuador.

Ten years after his death, Nancy organizes a commemoration for Father Alcides Jiménez, with the help of MINGA.

2009 ***Nancy's mother joins her husband in Ecuador.***

With the Women's Alliance, Nancy conducts a second research project, this time focused on the experiences of women in rural areas of Putumayo.

Illegal wiretapping and surveillance practices by Colombia's intelligence service, the Department of Administrative Security (*Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*, or DAS), are uncovered.

2010 Juan Manuel Santos is elected president. He insists that the FARC must first release all hostages it holds before his government would start peace talks with

the rebels.

Nancy receives an official letter from the Office of the Attorney General saying that she was among those whose phone calls, emails and conversations at home had been illegally intercepted by the DAS for years.

October — Again with MINGA, Nancy organizes a tribute to Father Alcides Jiménez. A book about his life and work is presented.

2011 ***With the Women's Alliance of Putumayo, CICODE (Center of Initiatives for Development Cooperation) and the University of Granada, Nancy organizes a course on gender for 120 women from Putumayo.***

Nancy is involved in creating a project bringing together two Colombian organizations (MINGA and Indepaz) and two U.S.-based organizations (Washington Office on Latin America and Center for International Policy) to independently monitor and report on Integrated Action (successor strategies of Plan Colombia) experiences in Colombia.

February — FARC releases several hostages.

June — Colombia's new Victims and Land Restitution Law is signed by President Santos, which is meant to compensate victims of civil conflict and return land to millions of displaced people.

September — Former intelligence chief Jorge Noguera (a close ally of former president Uribe) is sentenced to 25 years in prison for collaborating with paramilitary death squads.

The Women's Alliance of Putumayo receives an important human rights award, the Antonio Nariño Colombia Human Rights Prize, from the German and French governments for its work as "Weavers of Life."

December — Countrywide protests are held against the FARC.

2012 ***January — Nancy finishes her work with MINGA. She starts working with Gloria Flórez as an advisor on human rights and gender at the Andean Parliament.***

June — Congress approves a law setting up guidelines for peace talks with left-wing rebels.

August 26 — The Colombian government and the FARC sign a "General Accord to End the Conflict and Build a Stable, Enduring Peace," in which the parties have agreed to address five major points: land policies, political participation, the end of conflict, drug production and trafficking, and truth and reparations for

victims.

September to November — Nancy participates in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice in San Diego, Calif.

October — The Santos government starts peace talks with the FARC.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF NANCY SÁNCHEZ

Born Alongside Death

"Where am I?" Nancy asked, looking up to her mother, a family photo album in her lap.

The young Nancy sat on the steps of their spacious roof terrace, as she did every afternoon while her mother ironed clothes on the long wooden table covered in an aging white sheet.

A few days earlier her parents had brought out the album to show a family friend. There were plenty of baby pictures of her brother, big and naked, and several of her sister, pink and beautiful. But there were no baby pictures of Nancy.

The next day she snuck into her parents' bedroom where they kept the photos and carefully leafed through the bulky album she could barely hold in her 12-year-old hands. But still she couldn't find herself. Days went by until she gathered the courage to ask her mom for an explanation.

"I have been thinking about getting this question all my life," her mom answered.

"Why? Why are there no pictures of me when I was born?

"Because you were really ugly," she teased. "I would always hide you."

"What happened to me? Was I like a monster?" Nancy gasped.

"Almost," her mother playfully replied. But her expression changed quickly. "OK, Nancy, I want to tell you the truth."

•

"We are so sorry, Doña Fabiola," the doctor said. "She is dead." The baby girl she had just delivered showed no sign of life.

Fabiola shrieked. Her giddy anticipation of bringing a daughter into the world had grown for months with her belly. While the reality set in slowly and painfully, the doctor shrieked as well: "Wait, what is that?"

A tiny leg was poking out — a beacon of life, replacing disillusion with exhilaration. But the doctor had to act quickly. He tried to pull out the delicate creature, accidently breaking its arm in the process. But soon a miniscule baby girl presented herself to the world.

For almost seven months the twin sisters had lived together in their mother's womb, but for the last week her big baby sister had lain beside her, lifeless.

"She pushed her sister out of you because she had to live," the doctor said.

Before Fabiola had a chance to hold her daughter, Nancy was taken to the neonatal intensive care unit. When Rigoberto arrived and laid eyes on his offspring, he started to cry. "What did I do wrong to get a child like this?" He had hoped for another strong and healthy boy. Instead, he got a miniature girl whom he thought resembled a bat more than a human. But as he held his tiny daughter in the palm of his hand, the initial disappointment faded into concern.

"We don't know if she will survive," the doctor told them. "She was born with her head down, which is supposed to bring good luck. But she will need extensive medical treatment to have a chance to survive." He offered one last piece of advice: "Let her do whatever she wants, because she might die tomorrow."

Fabiola and Rigoberto took on the challenge, putting all their time, money and energy toward her survival. Afraid she wouldn't make it to the next day, her father took charge of her health, going out in the middle of the night for medical assistance if Nancy needed it. And every day after, her mother and grandmother bathed her in a tin tub, following her grandmother's special recipe: The water was infused with herbs, medicinal plants — and always a cup of brandy. When visitors came to the house to celebrate the newborn, her mother would hide her; she was not interested in their comments. She wanted to protect her daughter from the bad energy that visitors could pass on to her.

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On the steps, 12-year-old Nancy listened to her mother in amazement. Not only did she have a sister, this was her story — different from anyone else's. She was proud. This was who she was. The rebel. The survivor.

Virtue and Wisdom

From the back corner of the classroom, 7-year-old Nancy stared at the other side. The girls there had the same white blouse as she, the same white-and-red blocked skirt, the same white socks and black shoes, and the same necklace — a red cord with the emblem of the school that preached virtue and wisdom.

But in front of them lay their beautiful Hello Kitty notebooks. And she knew that their wooden desks hid a cooled lunchbox full of treats waiting to be devoured during the break. Yogurt and jellies, things Nancy could only dream of, and mashed baby food, something she still didn't understand. While they huddled together and delved into their delicacies, or bought what they craved for at the kiosk in the school's inner courtyard, Nancy would pull out her plastic bag and eat the one piece of bread her mom had given her in the morning.

On her first day in this school months prior, excited to be starting second grade, Nancy sat behind a desk. But the teacher told her determinately that she had to move to the other side of the room, where the bad students were sitting. For months since, Nancy had puzzled over these words, but still didn't know what to make of them.

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"Mom, what does it mean to be a good or a bad person?" she asked. They were sitting in the kitchen of their house, not far from the school.

"What?" her mother responded, alarmed.

"What is being a good or a bad person?" Nancy repeated.

"Why are you asking that?"

Nancy told her what had been on her mind for all these months — that at school her group was divided between the good and the bad students.

"And where are you?" her mom asked.

"With the bad people, of course," she said, shyly, expecting to be scolded.

"What?" Her mom's eyes turned black. She stormed out of the room, calling for her husband.

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The door flew open and her father rushed through the aisle between the long rows of desks, stopping in front of Nancy's. When she looked up she watched his flushed face soften, though still marked with rage.

Taking her hand and pulling her toward him, he said, "My daughter, it's been enough. We're getting out of here." Nearly 50 pairs of eyes were staring at them, but Nancy didn't care. Her father had come to stand up for her. Firmly holding his hand, she walked out of the school's main entrance, never to return — but having learned at least one important lesson: the real meaning of dignity.

Bucaramanga Limpia

It was early in the morning and still dark, but the lights of the food stalls, the loud music from the popular bars and the cars and people in the street never ceased to enliven the night. As she did every morning at 4:30, Nancy walked down the long stairway of the hotel where she lived with her family: her father, mother and grandmother, her younger sister Geny, her older brother Walter and her cousin Edgar, who had grown up with them.

Hotel Ris, named after her Ecuadorian father Rigoberto Sánchez who managed it, was in the unsafe neighborhood of Plaza de Mercado, the principal marketplace in the center of Bucaramanga. A small city in the northeast of Colombia, Bucaramanga is the capital of Santander, a province known for its strong and tough population. Nancy's mother Fabiola had grown up in the village of Guaca in the same province, and was the first in her family to move to the city. There were always cousins from the countryside staying with them who wanted to explore the opportunities of urban life, and whom Nancy would endearingly call her "band of cousins."

She wasn't alone at this dangerous hour. Edgar, older by 10 years and like a brother, accompanied Nancy to the bus stop, where she waited for the bus that would take her to high school, Colégio Nuestra Señora del Rosario. Rigoberto had given Edgar the responsibility of protecting her. He knew everyone in the neighborhood — and was considered the best fighter around.

Together they walked the half-block to the corner of the street on what was considered the dangerous side, where the robbers hung out, the homeless slept in the street and the motels provided the prostitutes and transvestites a place to go with their clients. Most businesses, shops and bars were located in the opposite direction of Hotel Ris, but they constantly felt the threat of muggings and store robberies. Across the street was the enormous marketplace where peasants gathered to sell their produce — always messy, noisy and lively. Nancy loved it. Every Saturday she would follow her mother. While taking in all the smells, sounds and colors, she proudly carried a big basket and listened to her mother — the queen of the neighborhood — catching up on all the gossip.

The streets at this time of the night were dominated by those on the margins of Colombian society: the homeless, prostitutes, transvestites, petty criminals, street children. But Nancy did not fear any of them, except for the gangs of robbers that came from other parts of the city. Her family and the hotel were an integral part of the neighborhood. People pointed at her. "That's Rigoberto's daughter!" "She is one of Fabiola's girls!"

When Edgar and Nancy got to the bus stop, they were cordially greeted by the scantily clad women and transvestites trying to seduce potential customers waiting at traffic lights: "Good morning!"

"Good morning, how are you?" Nancy asked, feeling out of place in her school uniform.

"It's a good night for us," one of the women responded. "We have many clients."

It was a hard life, working in a dangerous neighborhood and in a risky business, with clients who beat them up, or worse. They were the outcasts of society, but Nancy respected them. She saw them as neighbors, friends.

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"Do you remember Juana?" Edgar asked while they were again waiting for the bus that was always late.

"Yes," Nancy said. "He's the one always standing in that corner, right?"

"That's right. Yesterday he was killed."

For the last few months she had heard too many of these stories. A looming tension was hanging in the air and her parents urged her more often than usual to be careful. The previous week four people had been shot dead by two men on motorcycles. Nancy had heard the gunshots resonating between the buildings. Every week there were more names: Marcela, Alice, Lisa … not just names, but faces to her. Fewer and fewer faces on her street.

The city was in the grip of a "social cleansing" campaign, led by death squads such as the notorious *Mano Negra*, in conjunction with members of the National Police and Colombia's security service agency DAS (*Departamento Adminitrativo de Seguridad*), and often supported by local traders. To show their efficiency in establishing public order and safeguarding the city's image, they cleaned the streets by murdering those they labeled as socially undesirable: petty criminals and addicts, vagrants, street children, homosexuals and prostitutes — Nancy's neighbors.

While previously Nancy had been scared of the gangs terrorizing the neighborhood, it was now the police she feared most. They were hurting the people she cared for: her neighbors working and living in the streets, fighting for their survival. Although she didn't understand what was going on, she knew this wasn't the way to resolve the problem. She wanted to do something, but didn't know how or what. She felt impotent. She felt angry. But she kept the rage and grief to herself, even though she knew her mother, who had known every single one of them, shared her sorrow. Understanding that the police considered everyone living in this neighborhood a threat to public order, they both feared that the men in their family, Nancy's band of cousins, would die in the middle of this war.

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The uproar outside woke her. She heard people yelling, whistling and calling her father's name: "Rigoberto! Rigoberto!" Nancy jumped up and rushed past her sister, fast asleep, and looked out the window to the street below. A large group had gathered around a few men fighting amid the food stalls on the sidewalk. There were two motorcycles, one lying in the middle of the street. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. Among the fighting men she recognized her brothers and four cousins. There were also two unfamiliar men, but she knew who they were. Armed men in civilian clothes were part of the police force that had been terrorizing the neighborhood for almost two years.

She shivered. Since Walter's return from military service he had been very short-tempered and hard to handle. Edgar had never liked the police and his rebellious behavior often got him in trouble.

Nancy, still in the t-shirt and shorts she wore at night, stormed downstairs. Ahead of her was her mother, urging the night porter to open the front door.

"They are about to kill your son!" the man warned.

In panic, her mother flew down the immense stairway from the hotel's entrance to the street, her bare feet hardly touching the rough stone steps, her hair disheveled and a light blue nightgown fluttering around her slender body. Nancy was also outside but stayed high and safe on top of the stairs that had crowded with relatives and hotel guests in their pajamas, watching Fabiola approach the adrenalized crowd of men. She made her way through the mob to get to her son, who now had a gun pointed at his forehead. When she raised her voice, the never-sleeping neighborhood turned into a still life painting — the people on the stairs, the sidewalk and in front of the Plaza de Mercado frozen.

"If you want to kill him, you will have to kill me first!" her mother yelled, out of her mind.

"I don't kill women," the policeman answered.

"I could be the first," Fabiola responded determinately.

Rigoberto appeared behind her, breathless and in clothes he had randomly put on in the rush of the moment. But like all the men around he was silenced by the power of his wife's voice.

The policeman lowered his gun and said to her, "OK, ma'am. But make sure you watch after your sons."

"Everybody go home," she summoned, grabbing her drunken son and directing him and her nephews to the hotel. The crowd obeyed without objection and dissolved in silence.

Nancy watched the scene in amazement. She couldn't help but laugh out loud and feel pride rise within her: Her mother could do what 10 macho men could not.

Learning to Swim

She was exhausted. She lay down on the small but comfortable bed and rested her head, heavy with impressions of her first days in Barrancabermeja. Though weary, Nancy lay awake staring at the light blue walls of her tiny apartment.

She was afraid. She feared the night, even though the ever-shining lights of Barranca's oil refinery illuminated this town still unknown to her. Hours away from her hometown and living alone for the first time, the night seemed gloomier than ever. Nancy's ears were unacquainted with the sounds of this city, the continuous rumbling of the refinery and the cacophony of street vendors beneath her window.

She was sweating. The smothering heat had overwhelmed her the moment she arrived at Barranca's bus terminal two days earlier and had never ceased to hold its grip. Tossing constantly on the bed, she pondered this adventure.

But she was also exhilarated. Excited that she finally had the chance to do what she wanted most: to work in human rights. At the age of 18 she had started her studies in journalism at the Autonomous University of Bucaramanga. The lively debates about the outbursts of violence in the country were enriched by the inspiring guidance of her professors and the experiences of classmates from the countryside. When one of her friends introduced her to the vision of the Association of Peasant Workers of Carare (ATCC), Nancy was enchanted by their courage as they spoke freely about the human rights violations of the military, paramilitary and guerrilla groups in the rural areas. She was fascinated by these peasants who, without an education, had written a visionary proposal for peace, suggesting the creation of a combat-free zone to facilitate humanitarian dialogue and investment in social and economic development. It was these peasants who opened her eyes to her personal vocation. But her ambition to intern with the ATCC was shattered when three of the organization's leaders and the journalist Silvia Duzán were murdered. Nancy was furious that these groundbreaking peasants had been killed while trying to bring peace to the country, but it only strengthened her conviction to devote herself to the promotion of human rights. Finally she was here, in the oil-refining center of Colombia's conflicted Magdalena Medio region, to work as an intern with the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS).

She was nervous. She didn't know what to expect, aside from the few things Jorge, the director of CREDHOS, had told her. Earlier that day she met with him and was introduced to the work and the rest of the staff. The small team was comprised of Rafael, the assistant director; Blanca, Jorge's personal secretary; HH, his bodyguard; Julio César, a communications assistant; and Mary, who managed and cleaned the office. Nancy's main responsibility would be to publish a bulletin covering the numerous human rights cases CREDHOS worked on.

"We only have one condition," Jorge told her. "You always have to be available, weekdays and weekends, day and night."

"No problem," she had responded. "I'm here to work."

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A firm knock on the metal door awoke her in bewilderment. It took Nancy a moment to realize where she was, but even when she did, her confusion did not cease. *Never open the door to anyone. Never, not for any reason* — the words rushed through her mind. Jorge had spoken with emphasis when reciting the security instructions.

The knocking continued and became more insistent. A familiar voice: "Nancy, open the door. It's me!" Fearing something bad had happened, she got out of her bed and walked cautiously to the door.

There he was, Jorge, in his impeccable suit with an earnest look on his face. "Take your camera and come with me. Hurry!"

She quickly put on her jeans, a tank top, tennis shoes and glasses, and grabbed her camera and notebook before following him down the stairs. Only in the taxi did he tell her the reason for the wake-up call. Four *coteros*, men who worked as truck loaders, had disappeared while working on the side of the road. They had to find them.

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All day Nancy followed Jorge in his rhythmic footsteps, accompanied by HH. At dawn they had gone looking for the military checkpoint where the four men had disappeared. There was no checkpoint to be found. So they collected the statements of co-workers on the side of the road, who assured them they had seen their colleagues being detained by the military around 4 p.m. the previous day. At the time of their detention, according to these witnesses, the men had been filling holes in the road that led from Barranca to Bucaramanga, a job they had taken on to complement the low wages they earned as coteros.

They spent the rest of the day at the CREDHOS office. Jorge was constantly on the phone trying to find leads that would get them closer to the disappeared men. He kept in touch with all the institutions involved: the local human rights ombudsman, the national government, the human rights office, the military and the Judicial Technical Police, or PTJ. He also tried to draw public attention to the disappearances through the media. Blanca was in charge of documenting the story of the relatives of the disappeared men and filing the declaration.

Nancy felt exhilarated but lost. She had no idea what to do or how to do it, and there was no time for explanations. She could only watch and wait and learn.

After an exhausting day, as they were about to file the declaration officially, the phone rang. It was a friend to inform Jorge that the bodies of the four men had been located at the military base. They were dressed in military clothes and showed signs of torture and multiple gunshot wounds. The official report portrayed them as ELN [*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*] guerrilla fighters killed in combat, and presented them before the media with an array of weaponry. CREDHOS, however, denounced the incident publicly and in court as a case of extrajudicial killing. This version was supported by the men's relatives, witnesses and co-workers, who also refuted the military account. For them, their husbands, sons, fathers, colleagues and neighbors were humble men, working hard to provide for their families.

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Nancy and HH followed Jorge into the tiny shack that fit right into the neighborhood, a squatter settlement formed by improvised houses interconnected by terracotta mud paths. The walls were wood, the floor covered with mud. The hut was divided into a living room and a small bedroom shared by everyone in the family.

The moment Nancy crossed the threshold she was overcome by the tension in the room, overtaken by the desperation of those grieving — mixed with the unbearable and overwhelming smell of death, a smell yet unfamiliar to her.

In the middle of the room lay the man's corpse, handed over to the family by the military, in an open coffin made of yellow wood, the cheapest kind. Flowers lay before it. A woman was sitting on one of the few chairs, weeping while trying to soothe the tears of the boy she was holding on her lap. The scorching sun on the zinc roof had turned the hut into an oven. Other relatives were sitting on the floor, tears dripping off their faces, sweat pouring off their bodies. Nancy wavered in the mix of the heat, the desperation, the all-pervading smell, her lack of sleep and the feeling of impotence.

"Nancy," Jorge's determined voice interrupted her thoughts. "I need you to take pictures of the corpse."

Everyone in the room seemed to be looking at her.

"What?" she stumbled.

"We need to have the proof for the case," he insisted.

For a moment she was again that little girl, pushed into the water, not knowing how to swim. Falling deeper into the well alongside the river. Trying to keep her head above the freezing water and reach the rocky shore, she panicked. Nobody was paying attention, nobody was there to save her. On that beautiful summer day, surrounded by her family, she thought she would die. Driven by a strong will to survive — the same that drove her to force her sister from her mother's womb before her — she managed to grab one of the big brown rocks that enclosed the natural pool. Never again would she fear the water, and she would never forget how to swim.

Nancy pulled herself together. "OK, my boss, I will take the pictures."

But first she needed to regain her strength. She stepped outside and inhaled deeply, letting the clean air clear her mind. With the fresh air stored in her lungs she dared to step back inside. As she approached the decomposing body, the pungent odor became ever more intense. The man was lying with his face up, or what was left of it. A gaping hole showed the destructive force of the bullet. The wounds of the heavily tortured body were sewn together with large stitches.

As she was examining the corpse, HH helped her reposition it, enabling Nancy to register all the details that could constitute valuable evidence. The smell of death surrounded and penetrated her; she felt wretched. *Nancy, you must control yourself*. With her force of mind she managed to close

herself off momentarily from the outside world and focus on her task. She leaned over the body, capturing the deep wounds and marks of torture with the lens of her zoomless camera.

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The smell of death would not leave her. She sat down on a low stone wall in the park and once more filled her lungs with fresh air. She was too tired to join Jorge at a human rights workshop. They had visited all four families. Four times she had felt their desperation. Four times she had taken the pictures of a maimed body in decay.

HH, who until then had been reserved toward her, sat down beside her. Although he was an older man, Nancy was struck by the strength of his body and the beauty of his face. The white guayabera shirt he wore matched his silvery hair. He looked at her with his light and friendly eyes and asked, "What do you want, my friend?"

"I need to throw up," she said.

HH stood up and walked away. A few minutes later he returned with a small bottle of *aguardiente*. "If you don't take this now," he said as he handed her the anise-flavored liqueur, "this smell might be stuck in your nose for the rest of the week."

Nancy understood in that moment that he would always be there, looking after her, caring for her. With this friendship she would survive the deep cold water. He was the rock to hold.

Forgetting the Unforgettable

"What would you do if I were killed and you knew who had done it?" HH looked her straight in the eye.

The question caught Nancy by surprise. They had been chatting casually in the back of the taxi taking them back to the CREDHOS office. It had been a long day investigating a case in one of Barranca's neighborhoods.

"What kind of question is that, my friend?" she replied, hoping he was joking.

"No, answer me," he insisted.

She tried to think and answer quickly, but the question only grew larger within her. *What would I do?* she wondered, the question inciting an internal fight.

I would hate the person who would kill HH.

She had first encountered the feeling of hate at the age of 11. For one long, terrible year the most popular girl in her class had made her life miserable. Nancy kept quiet in a corner, but hate grew inside her. She was disgusted by the feeling. At the end of that year she realized that by hating her bully she was demeaning herself to the same level. She decided never to hate again.

But what was the alternative when someone she loved was killed?

"They won't kill you HH. But if they do, I really don't know what I would do," Nancy finally admitted. "If you died, I would die too."

•

As if in a chaotic dream she followed her boss down the dark stairway from their muggy second-floor office to the street. She couldn't hear anything but the heartbeat in her ears. *Tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tum.*

This is impossible. This can't be happening, she told herself.

An hour earlier they had said goodbye at the balcony of the office.

"Are you already leaving?" Nancy had asked.

"Yes, I have to go," HH said, his face paler than usual.

"Don't you want to go for a drink?" she tried.

"No, I have to go."

Before he left he had given her a kiss on the cheek and a warm hug.

Now she was on her way to the mortuary.

Slowly, very slowly, knowing her last hope was about to be destroyed, she entered the mortuary — the place they had spent so much time together, registering the unidentified dead bodies. Only days earlier they had been here for the most horrifying picture Nancy had ever taken. The pieces of the body they were to document had been delivered in a sack. HH had opened it and together they sorted out the various body parts, so Nancy could immortalize the unknown victim. Like so many times before, she told HH: "This is the worst picture so far."

HH was laid face-up on the cold autopsy table, wearing the same guayabera shirt and pants, his unchanging style. Only this time his white shirt was covered in crimson. She knew right away it was him. Nancy felt like she had known him for years. But it had only been a few months between the moment she first arrived in Barranca and the day he was killed — March 19, 1991.

Working diligently and living intensely on the line between life and death, Nancy and HH had grown close quickly, sharing laughter — often inappropriate — to lighten their macabre work. He had taught her the rules for survival in Barranca: *She had to be strong*. To make her resistant to the heat, he had taken her on a long walk along the city's principal avenue in the blazing midday sun. *She had to be informed*. He inducted her into the security strategy he used during every mission: Go to the local bar for a beer with the peasants and they'll share their valuable insights on the current situation. Together, HH and Nancy survived the harsh everyday reality of human rights work in a long, complicated, violent conflict.

Her mind would not accept that the unimaginable had happened. HH had been killed, executed by two unidentified men disguised in civilian clothes. They had followed him and shot him several times from behind as he got off the bus in front of his house. It was not only an assassination, but a message to the head of CREDHOS, Jorge. They murdered the man who had always been behind him.

As if in the middle of a cloud, Nancy saw only bits of what was happening around her. She stared at HH, convincing herself it was really him. It took her ages to take his picture. Just one. The most difficult one she ever took.

"Bye, HH," Nancy whispered. "See you soon." She realized then that in their work, death was most likely. And at that moment she wished it would happen to her sooner rather than later.

It was late at night when she left the mortuary. She decided to walk home so she could breathe and be alone. Looking for a place to have a beer, Nancy ended up at a hotdog stand. She sat on a stool and let the cold golden fluid ease her mind.

"Nancy? What are you doing here all alone at this time of the day?"

She lifted her head to find Rafael, the assistant director of CREDHOS.
"I just came back from the mortuary," she said.

"Let me take you to your apartment."

"No, I'm going by myself," Nancy said. She didn't care what would happen to her. She preferred to die.

•

It was only a few days after HH's death but they had resumed their never-ending work. Nancy was sitting opposite Blanca in the office, discussing a case. Blanca suddenly remarked, "Nancy, you must live with me."

"What?" Blanca had never been very kind to Nancy during her first months in CREDHOS. But she knew how close Nancy and HH had been and pitied her, whose laughter no longer filled the office. Since HH's death, she seemed to Blanca worryingly sad and too quiet.

"Yes. It's dangerous that you live alone, and after what happened with HH …. I have a room where you can stay, and you can have lunch and share a taxi with me every day."

"No, I don't want to bother you. I'm fine," Nancy objected.

"You are coming with me. It's an order."

Blanca took her in. She lived in a large one-story house with her husband, son and daughter. She was a lady — always immaculately dressed, brave, pretty and young. Every morning after coffee they left together for the office. At noon they would go home for lunch, and, now that Nancy no longer had a friend to have a beer with, they left CREDHOS together at the end of the workday.

She became a great friend to Nancy, but like a mother too. Nancy no longer went back to Bucaramanga every Friday as she used to, but often stayed for the weekends, keeping Blanca company and attending parties in the never-sleeping city of Barranca.

Blanca gave Nancy the force and motivation she had lost after HH's death. She created space for her to breathe. They did not talk about what had happened. Everyone at CREDHOS tried to forget the unforgettable. By focusing on work, Nancy tried to ignore the shadow looming over her. Work became her therapy, and in Blanca she found a new committed partner.

Together they formed a supreme team. They continued to document and denounce the two violent realities in Barranca: paramilitary violence terrorized the city, while the military carried out a scorched earth campaign in the countryside — bombing small towns, detaining and torturing peasants, disappearing people in order to take "the water from the fish," to exterminate the population among which the guerrilla could move.

Blanca and Nancy worked on important cases of extrajudicial executions, looking for witnesses and taking their declarations. Their friend, the director of the Judicial Technical Police, strengthened their team. His presence gave the testimonies juridical value so they could be used in court. They registered and filed the unidentified bodies and assisted people to find their loved ones

in the unnervingly high stack of photo albums in their office. Meanwhile Nancy continued to assemble the information on all the cases in the region and publish them in the handmade bulletins that came out every few months.

•

All weekend Nancy had been working on her thesis from her parents' home in Bucaramanga. She was no longer used to going back to her hometown for weekends, as Blanca always encouraged her to stay with her. So she had been confused on Friday, Blanca's birthday, when Blanca insisted she should go.

"You must finish your thesis. You have postponed it long enough," Blanca argued, calmly packing Nancy's suitcase.

After they celebrated Blanca's birthday with cake and champagne at the office, Nancy and Rafael hailed a taxi. Reluctantly, she got into the car and sat with the blue plastic weekend bag Blanca had packed for her on her lap. She looked out the window to see Blanca, illuminated by the light in their office, on the balcony, leaning against the railing. Blanca said goodbye and gave her a nostalgic smile.

Nancy was up early that Monday morning despite working late the night before. She had to call Blanca. She needed information for her thesis, but she also felt a strong urge to talk with her. Every hour, starting early in the morning, she called Blanca at the office. She called so often that it worried her mom: "Why are you on the phone every hour?"

"I need to talk with Blanca, mom!"

But every time, Maria answered the phone — and each time there was some reason she could not put her through: Blanca was busy. She was talking with a witness. She had just left. Knowing Blanca always went home between 5 and 6, she tried one more time in the late afternoon. The phone had not rung, yet Maria answered in a panic.

"They just killed Blanca!"

Nancy did not believe her and tried to calm her down so she could get more information.

Maria explained that Blanca had been waiting for a taxi in front of the office between the street vendors. She was killed by gunmen in civilian clothes. Three policemen who witnessed the attack ignored her cries for help and did not go after her assailants.

Maria had run up to the office to call Rafael, but Nancy's call came through when she picked up the phone.

Nancy was beside herself. She smashed the phone against the wall in disbelief and fury, and hit it again with her fist, crying convulsively. Her mother tried to calm her and help her think of the next steps to take. "First, you must call Rafael, like Maria asked you."

Rafael told her to go and look for Jorge, who had arrived back in Bucaramanga that weekend after having spent half a year in the United States, forced out of Colombia following repeated threats.[4]

Nancy took a taxi to his home and found him like she had never seen him before. Defeated. Looking so small despite his height. Nancy knew Blanca was everything to him. He didn't cry, but only spoke a few words: "Nancy, we need to go."

•

Her knees were trembling. Nancy was in the living room she had called home for the last 10 months. She tried to walk to the open coffin in the center of the room, but something in her resisted. While getting closer step by step, the room started spinning faster. Her body no longer answered her. It was going its own way. When she finally saw Blanca's face, a piercing cry escaped Nancy's throat. She thought she would faint. She had lost control.

Please Nancy, breathe, she told herself. Somehow her body managed to move toward the door. By breathing in and out, she slowly regained control. Nancy felt guilty, remorseful that she had not stayed with Blanca. Why had she not insisted?

With the little force she had left she walked over to Blanca's family: her son, daughter and husband, who had always tried to convince Blanca to take on a less risky job. But her work was her passion, and she had never considered quitting.

Nancy did not know what to say. The consoling words were stuck in her throat. After a long silence she uttered softly and simply, "I'm sorry."

•

In the middle of Tiburón, one of Barranca's poorest neighborhoods, on February 10, 1993, a Ford with 70 kilos of dynamite exploded with destructive force. The makeshift home of wood and zinc did not resist the blast, and neither did many of its inhabitants. Nancy had come to register its aftermath.

It was more than a year after Blanca had been killed. Her death had been a devastating blow to Jorge, to Nancy and to the committee. By killing Blanca, they had killed a part of Jorge. He owed much of his reputation as a nationally and internationally renowned lawyer to Blanca's dedicated work. Her death was a clear message to him. The slaying came as he returned from the United States, and a day after his opinion piece was published in the *New York Times*. In it, he strongly decried human rights violations by government forces in the region.[5] So they encircled him, murdering the people around him, death coming ever closer.

Nancy's sadness, anger and guilt over Blanca's death forced her to stay. She could not walk away now that the committee needed her most. "You don't have to go anywhere. You were like a daughter to her," Blanca's husband had told her, so she was still living in her house. But she could hardly bear it. She paid no attention to her security. She wanted her guilt to be killed.

The committee had gradually fallen apart. Julio, their bodyguard since HH's death, was killed at the end of June in the same year as Blanca. A few weeks before that, on June 10, 1992, Nancy and Jorge survived an armed attack on their vehicles while returning from a mission. Following intensifying threats, Jorge was forced to leave the country. Rafael had also left, and the other CREDHOS members were sooner or later dismissed because of funding constraints.

Nancy continued to work with deputy director Jorge Galindo, initially assisted by the stand-ins that were hired, following and guiding him. Together they worked hard and managed to laugh, but it was not the same as before. The team that had seemed invincible was gone. Everybody warned her that they were eliminating all the people close to Jorge Gomes, and that she would be next. They knew she was the one publishing all the denunciations. But she did not care: *If they want to kill me, they can kill me*, she told herself.

Eventually she and Jorge Galindo were the only ones left, with no money and innumerous threats. He told her it would be better if she left, and one of Jorge's friends in a Bogotá-based human rights organization tried to convince her to come to the capital. But she was not ready. She wanted to stay until the bitter end.

The police had barricaded the area in Tiburón where the explosion had wreaked inestimable damage. Nancy identified herself and asked to be let through. She felt she was entering the set of a horror movie: The deep red of blood was mixed with the brown mud and blackened huts. Pieces of bodies, torn apart by the explosion, lay scattered on the scorched soil and black carcasses of the houses. The remains of the disaster crunched underneath her feet as she carefully navigated her way. Her camera was still locked in her hand that had tightened around it, her muscles tensing with what her eyes witnessed. She was horrified. Horrified by the senseless violence, the human suffering, the cruelty of the war. She could not do it, not anymore.

She turned around. She went home, packed her things and without saying goodbye to anyone, left Barranca that day. Nancy carefully closed the door behind her. All that happened had to be forgotten.

Seeds of Peace[6]

Nancy fidgeted in her chair while trying to concentrate on the meeting in Mocoa. It was an important meeting with visitors from Bogotá and the governor of Putumayo, to which the governor had called her in person. But Nancy was impatient for its end. She had promised to meet Father Alcides Jiménez in Puerto Caicedo. While she waited, her mind drifted to her first journey from the capital to the department of Putumayo, a place she could barely find on a map.

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In Bogotá, where she worked for the human rights organization CINEP, the Center for Research and Popular Education, after she was forced to leave Barrancabermeja in 1993, Nancy quickly became bored with her office work. Sitting behind her desk all day, counting the dead in the newspapers to contribute to a human rights violations database, she missed working directly with the people on the ground. When the opportunity came to go back into the field in 1994 to assist the Human Rights Committee of Putumayo, she accepted immediately. *But Putumayo? Where was that?* she thought to herself.

A vast, seemingly infinite jungle stretched out below her, the green immensity broken only by a dark blue line meandering through the impermeable landscape. Staring out the plane window, Nancy wondered where she was going, and could not foresee the reality hidden beneath the dense foliage.

Nancy descended from the plane on the runway in the middle of town. Surrounded by the hot air and dust of the road, she waited for the person who was supposed to pick her up. When no one came, she made her own way to the church where she hoped to encounter the local priest — a member of the Human Rights Committee — and take the first tentative steps in her Putumayan journey.

She found a department abandoned by the state, where the population lived under precarious socioeconomic conditions, without roads, potable water, aqueducts, electricity or computers. Nancy felt lost in this new reality, the other side of Colombia unknown to most of the rest of the country. She was struck by the abundance of coca crops. Putumayo — with its vast jungles, border with Ecuador and large numbers of impoverished farmers unable to market their traditional agricultural crops — provided fertile ground for drug traffickers who had introduced the lucrative coca in the 1980s. The department quickly became the principal coca producer in the world, triggering the largest flow of people, money and arms the region had ever seen.

The omnipresence of the narcotraffic, intertwined with the presence of guerrillas who dominated the rural areas since 1984, was an environment completely new to Nancy. It blurred the boundaries between the political, economic and social, producing a department ruled by the law of the gun. She was amazed by the sharp contrast between the surreal culture of luxury, financed by drug money, and the primitive living conditions, poor infrastructure and lack of public services in this border region.

The first time she saw the epitome of coca culture played out in front of her she could not believe her eyes. On one of her first missions, Nancy went to Piñuña Negro — a small settlement along the Putumayo River, four hours from Puerto Asís and infamous for its trade in coca paste. She was only allowed in after she presented herself to local militants of the FARC. The street she entered was merely 60 feet long and 6 feet wide, but Nancy gasped when she saw the amount of money that passed through this small street. *Traquetos* — intermediaries between producers and traffickers — lined both sides of the mud path. They weighed coca paste and bundles of money on the scales in front of them, while hundreds of peasants gathered around trying to sell their product for the best price.

In the night, in the middle of this town where the people lived without electricity and water, she stumbled upon the most modern discotheque she had ever seen. She would always remember the image of the peasant in his rags and robust boots swaying on the rotating dance floor — the ultimate embodiment of coca culture.

Nancy struggled to pursue her work in this unfamiliar context, even though her tasks at the committee were essentially the same as those in Barranca: talk with victims, document the declarations and make them public. In Barranca she used to work in the middle of a dirty war marked by pervasive political violence and persecution of the political left, where boundaries had been clear. But in Putumayo's murky culture of violence revolving around the illegal economy, Nancy never knew where the danger came from, or how best to fight it.

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As her meeting in Mocoa neared its end, Nancy was eager to return to Puerto Caicedo and Father Alcides, who had invited her to join him in a march for peace. It was September 11, 1998, the last day of the Week for Peace he had organized to set a precedent against armed groups and to strengthen his initiative of active neutrality — a strategy of promoting a culture of nonviolence in which indifference was not an option.[7] It was just one of his inspiring and courageous proposals Nancy learned of since she had first met him, three years before.

In that first meeting, he welcomed her with a wide smile while he sat in the presbytery of his church in Puerto Caicedo, his short legs dangling, his wise eyes peering at her through his big round glasses. Nancy was finally in front of the Catholic priest she had heard so much about. Father Alcides had come to the region in 1977, and had worked in Puerto Caicedo since 1981. His reputation had traveled to all corners of Putumayo. To the other priests in the department he was a mentor: They admired him and tried to replicate his approach in their own communities. So when the priest from Puerto Asís finally introduced her to Father Alcides, Nancy's expectations were high. And because she worked with a national nongovernmental organization (NGO) and was the only human rights worker in Putumayo, Father Alcides was also eager to talk with her — he could use all the support he could get to fulfill his plans.

In the intense conversation that followed, he told her about his origins, his vision and the projects he initiated. Father Alcides was originally from the indigenous Inga community in Cauca, a neighboring department of Putumayo. The Inga were known for their wisdom, strength and struggle for rights. He grew up learning to respect the sacredness of the land and to value nature as a

protective mother. In his pockets he always carried some seeds, whose life-generating power fascinated him and that embodied his mission to protect the biodiversity of the Amazon and the world. He believed that only if human beings devoted themselves to protecting and loving all expressions of life, could peace flourish.

Since 1980, Father Alcides had closely witnessed the destructive effects of the evolving coca culture on the population. It had created an individualized and violent reality, and walking in the countryside you no longer came across plantain, yucca or rice. To oppose this new pernicious culture, the connection of the peasants with the land — the center of community organization — had to be restored. They had to create alternative economic opportunities for themselves. Father Alcides joined forces with other priests and started a new program focused on growing food, giving health and providing organizational development.

Inspired by liberation theology Father Alcides believed that working with the people on the ground was essential. At the same time he recognized that community building was a long-term process requiring patience and determination. Through popular education he tried to raise awareness among people about their rights and build their self-esteem. With his school of leadership he built and trained a network of leaders to strengthen the social organizations in the region and to help spread his knowledge and projects all over Lower Putumayo.

He is a true leader, Nancy thought, impressed by the priest's charisma and intelligence. The encounter far exceeded her already high expectations. She realized that his deep wisdom, unifying power, positive attitude, idealistic realism — culminating in a beautiful proposal to identify leaders and empower the communities in the face of state neglect — were exactly what Putumayo needed. She wanted to learn more and support the process he had started.

After working with the Committee of Human Rights for over a year, Nancy moved to Mocoa, the capital of Putumayo, where she started to work for the provincial Health Department (Dasalud). Even though she had not worked directly with Father Alcides during her time at the committee, over time they had become close friends when they would meet in human rights workshops. They had long conversations about his philosophy of life, the situation in Putumayo and the history of his home of Cauca, the source of all his knowledge.

Most importantly, he taught her the importance of the right to speak. Father Alcides never kept silent about the truth. In the pulpit of his church he talked openly about the situation in Putumayo, about violence, about violations of human rights. The few times Nancy heard him speak she was moved by his words.

Father Alcides also used the right to speak as a strategy to empower women. "When they learn to speak out, they can defend their rights," he believed, and always pushed the women to talk publicly about the problems they encountered. In frustration and anger, he told Nancy that women were the ones bearing the brunt of the macho coca culture. They suffered from domestic violence and could hardly provide for their families with the little money left after the men spent their incomes on beer and prostitutes.

As a man and a priest, Father Alcides was the first in Putumayo to recognize the importance of working with women. Understanding that they were the key to building a sustainable and peaceful future, he was dedicated to educating them about their rights and urging them to become economically independent. He wanted men to help with household chores and encouraged women to work outside the home, believing that the time was ripe for women to take political power. Under his guidance, the Association of Women of the Municipality of Puerto Caicedo (ASMUN) — the first women's organization of Putumayo — was born, one of the many peasant organizations he promoted. Nancy was impressed by the projects these women developed, using the riches of the Amazon to make medicines, food, soap or shampoo. While Father Alcides, and he alone, was paying attention to the difficult situation of the women and their potential to make change, Nancy continued to focus on her work with peasant organizations.

Together, they discussed replicating his methods — to work intensively with a core group of leaders who could then disseminate the acquired skills and knowledge in their own communities. But they needed the financial support to execute their plans.

Fortune was on their side. The people in charge at Dasalud were familiar with the work of Father Alcides and wanted to focus on the epidemiology of violence. When they learned of a proposal by a Bogotá-based NGO focused on human rights education, Nancy was asked to lead the initiative and further develop it with Father Alcides. She immediately accepted and the priest was also enthusiastic. They intended to train a select group of leaders from all over Putumayo in order to build a network of trainers for peace, "*Red de Formadores para la Paz*," that could eventually work together and serve as a network of solidarity and support they could call on in case of threats, calamities or other problems in the community.

Nancy and Father Alcides worked together at every step of the development of the project. Upon his advice she invited teachers, women, priests who worked on the ground, peasants, indigenous leaders and promoters of health in the rural areas. Every other week for six months, these selected leaders from Lower, Middle and Upper Putumayo gathered in Mocoa for the training — given by the NGO from Bogotá — and earned an official certificate of human rights. In a series of workshops named "How to Form Leaders," they learned about things like self-esteem, community relations and human rights.

After the initial training was over, Nancy managed to get additional resources from Dasalud to take the next step: bringing the workshops to the communities. This was done in two ways. The leaders themselves gave workshops, or the group of leaders would go to the communities to give the workshop. In the latter case, people who lived in the community felt supported when outsiders listened to them and paid attention to their needs. This external support also strengthened the individual leader's position in the community.

It was a struggle to sustain the process with the limited financial resources available. They had to pay for transportation, food and educational material for all the attendees of the workshop. But together Father Alcides and Nancy worked hard to sow seeds of peace, so Putumayo would grow to become a more just and fruitful place.

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Nancy was anxious to leave her meeting in Mocoa and go support Father Alcides in his march for peace, which was even more important now that the population was caught between paramilitary and guerrilla groups. The paramilitaries had recently arrived in Lower Putumayo — they had already taken control of Puerto Asís. They were operating from their base Villa Sandra, a *finca* just five minutes outside of Puerto Asís, and 10 from Puerto Caicedo. The guerrillas, who had been in the area for years, tried to force the population to choose sides and revolt against the paramilitaries. But Father Alcides wanted the municipality of Puerto Caicedo and its inhabitants to declare themselves neutral in the armed conflict, to avoid participation — direct and indirect — with all the armed actors, and to actively oppose the injustice committed by them.

The voice of a colleague interrupted her thoughts: "Nancy, Father Alcides on the phone for you."

The office had only one landline and it was hard to reach her there, so Nancy knew right away it was important. She excused herself and walked out of the meeting room to answer the phone.

"I urgently need to talk to you in person," Father Alcides said. "Could you please come to Puerto Caicedo right away?"

"Father, I can't leave now, but I'll come as soon as I can. We've almost finished the meeting."

When the meeting was over she rushed to her apartment to get her luggage. But while she was getting ready to leave the phone rang. A man's voice on the other end spoke slowly.

"Nancy, Father Alcides was killed only a few minutes ago."

The line went dead.

She ran to her car to embark on the three-hour journey from Mocoa to Puerto Caicedo. Her car stumbling over the unpaved road, her mind raced fast and unstoppable: *Why did I not leave the meeting? Why, why, why? Maybe I could have done something. No, it is impossible that he was killed. Maybe he was only hurt?* For the first time in her life, Nancy prayed. All the bumpy way to Puerto Caicedo.

Finally she arrived at the church, his church. When she entered the dark presbytery where his body was lying, the crushing guilt made her knees tremble, just as they had when she entered Blanca's house after her death. Only this time the guilt weighed heavier on her. It was her fault, she told herself. She had not been there to protect him.

He had been killed during Mass after the march for peace, in front of his parishioners and standing in the altar — Putumayo's source of truth. During the ceremony two unknown men had appeared in the church. They fired during the most sacred moment, when he was offering the chalice. The bullets left a hole in the sacred cup and the sacred book. The woman who was always beside him, Evangelina Quiñonez, jumped in front of him to try to protect the priest. She, too, was killed. With a gunshot wound in his leg, Father Alcides managed to get outside — not to flee from

the men who followed him, but to die holding the thing he loved most: his zapote tree, which sheltered the church and his house from the sun's blistering rays.

Nancy knew the FARC guerrillas had been watching the Father's whereabouts, but when she heard how he was killed she had her doubts. This was a paramilitary-style murder. In confusion, she asked someone in which direction the men had left the church. They had gone to the left, in the opposite direction of the paramilitary base at Villa Sandra. It could have been the guerrillas.

She was outraged at the senseless assassination of Putumayo's inspiring leader and her personal mentor. She was not the only one. The whole population turned its back toward the guerillas. To declare that the murder had been an error did not save the guerrillas from public condemnation. Not only did this error cost the FARC its popular support, it also changed the course of Putumayo's history. The FARC began eliminating and persecuting leaders of the organizations Father Alcides promoted, effectively paralyzing civil society.

Even though Nancy had said goodbye to him, holding his cold hand, she could not accept the Father's death. Guilt, anger and disbelief gnawed at her. It left a stone in her heart, which she could bear only by continuing to propagate the seeds of peace.

Screaming Silence

Nancy looked past Fatima's bare but colorful shoulder, amazed by the magnitude of the demonstration — thousands of women surrounding the wooden scaffold on which they were standing. The women held evocative banners they had carried with them from across the country, banners meant to break the silence in Putumayo:

"No to the fumigations, yes to the non-violent eradication of coca."

"For the demilitarization of life!"

"We say no to the war!"

"The Colombian women want to live without violence!"

Most of the women were wearing black t-shirts with printed white slogans of *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*, a national women's network that organized the event:

"Women don't bear children for the war."

Under the motto "Not a child more for the war," over 3,000 women from all over Colombia — Cauca, Nariño, Valle del Cauca, Caquetá, Risaralda, Tolima, Huila, Santander, Barrancabermeja, Bolívar, Atlántico, Chocó, Antioquia, Bogotá — and a number of international representatives and press had travelled in a caravan of buses from the capital to the marginal region of Lower Putumayo. After a short ceremony in Mocoa and a stop in Villagarzón, they had arrived in Puerto Caicedo late the night before, breaking the imposed curfew. The military soldiers stood powerless against the sea of women challenging martial law. With no hotel to host them, the women occupied all the available spaces for the night: the houses of women who opened their doors to them, the church and even, like Nancy, the local brothel.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 25, 2003, all the women embarked on a march through the war-torn town, chanting their mantra: "The women of Putumayo are not alone. Ruta Pacífica is here!"

Some held symbolic black umbrellas to protect themselves from the clouds of pesticides that afflicted the region: "We resist the glyphosate rain!"

Standing in front of Nancy, Fatima was getting ready to give the speech they had just prepared together. She wore a turquoise shawl, wrapped around her waist like a skirt, and her upper body was covered only with a painting. The image said more than a thousand words and embodied an important message of the women: No more fumigations! The contrast between the colorful, diverse nature of Putumayo — the overwhelming green, deep blue of the rivers and red of the fruits on one side of her body — contrasted sharply with the lifeless yellow-brown of the scorched earth on the other half of her chest.

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Three years before, Nancy had first seen the effects of the fumigations while she was working for the Health Department of Putumayo. Driving deeper and deeper into Putumayo, surrounded by the endless green of coca plantations, the sudden change of scenery hurt her eyes. The sparkling green gave way to the yellow of seared earth, withered plants and skeletons of leafless trees.

In the year 2000, the Colombian government in alliance with the United States launched Plan Colombia. The main objectives of this war against drugs were to eradicate all coca crops in the country and to reestablish democracy and strengthen government presence in these territories. Putumayo became the central focus of the key initial strategy of Plan Colombia, "Push into the South," and the indiscriminate fumigations that were part of the military offensive.

On their way from Mocoa to La Hormiga, Nancy and Winifred, a friend and researcher from the United States, stopped at a rural school in La Concordia in Valle de Guamuez. Nancy wanted to say hello to a befriended teacher and ask her about the impact of the fumigations that had started a month earlier. The teacher immediately called the president of the *Junta de Acción Comunal* (Communal Action Council), an organization that formed the link between the municipality and the local peasants. He immediately arrived, and many people who wanted to share their experiences soon gathered in the school.

"OK, we need to see the impact on the ground," Nancy told the president after hearing some of their stories. "Is it far?"

He escorted both women to a hill just outside the village. From the top they saw the valley stretching out before them in different shades of beige, the vegetation slowly burned by the clouds of chemicals that had enveloped and devastated all that was alive within a matter of weeks. It was not only plants; animals and people were affected as well. The peasants told them about the dead monkeys, fish, birds and domestic and farm animals. The cows they kept for their subsistence were sick and their grazing plots had been destroyed. Many children suffered from rashes, and people complained about diarrhea and respiratory problems.

Nancy was starting to understand the logic of the local peasants. The cultivation of coca had been developed as a way to survive — the only way, in the eyes of many. Where outsiders just saw a valley full of coca crops, and while in some areas drug lords did own large stretches of land, here, the peasants explained, they owned small plots of lands and the harvest of every four months gave them just enough on which to live. After paying for the workers and the needed pesticides, very little was left for the peasants to provide for their families. With the fumigations of Plan Colombia they lost everything they worked for with such dedication, from 4 a.m. till 6 p.m. every day, in just seconds.

"We don't have money. We don't have any food because the harvest was lost. We don't even have one plantain for cooking," reported a farmer. "My child is sick because of the rashes, and my wife has diarrhea, but I don't have the money to bring them to the hospital."

Hearing the stories of these hard-working peasants, Nancy committed herself to monitoring the devastating impact of the fumigations and raising awareness. Together with the head of the epidemiology section of the Health Department, she documented 6,000 complaints about effects on

health and food security in the year 2000 alone. In addition, many people complained of the indiscriminate nature of the fumigations: Even agricultural projects established to provide an alternative to the cultivation of coca — either spontaneous projects or those designated by a portion of the U.S. budget for Plan Colombia — were affected by the fumigations.

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Nancy tore her eyes from the evocative body painting that symbolized their renewed fight against the indiscriminate fumigations, a struggle that had faded over the years. But under the cover of protesting Plan Colombia in 2003, the women also rallied against the oppression of armed actors.

The women had come to demonstrate against and decry the humanitarian crisis in Putumayo, where the population was caught between paramilitaries and guerilla groups. With the start of Plan Colombia the situation had further deteriorated. On the ground the people were terrorized by the repression and violence from all armed actors — armed shutdowns, sexual violence, large-scale massacres, the extermination and disappearance of community leaders — and from the air their livelihoods were threatened by the indiscriminate fumigations that destroyed their crops. Many people were forced to leave their homes, causing mass displacement in the entire department. Their freedom of movement was further limited and civil society was demolished.

Amid this adversity Nancy worked diligently to document and denounce the destructive consequences of Plan Colombia and the armed conflict in Putumayo. She recorded testimonies and wrote reports to call attention to the critical situation. She allied with Gloria, a good friend and the director of the human rights organization *Asociación MINGA*, to reach a national and international audience, focusing in particular on raising awareness in the United States, where much of the money for Plan Colombia was coming from. She also accompanied several missions of journalists, researchers and human rights organizations to show them the reality on the ground.

In her dedicated work she did not make only friends. In 2001 the increasingly precarious situation and growing threats by paramilitary groups — who had taken control over Villagarzón, close to Putumayo's capital Mocoa where Nancy lived and worked — forced her to seek refuge abroad. Gloria arranged for a fellowship through Amnesty International that allowed her to study in France for a year.

Upon her return to Colombia, Nancy started to work directly with MINGA and Gloria convinced her to go back to Putumayo. But nothing was left of what they had built. Many of the leaders she had worked with had been killed by paramilitary or guerrilla groups. The social fabric had been destroyed.

So when Amanda, a teacher and Ruta Pacífica's representative in Putumayo, and Fatima, an education supervisor in Putumayo she had collaborated with during her time at the Health Department, invited her to be involved in organizing a massive demonstration in the department, she willingly accepted. She realized this was an opportunity for the female leaders and women's organizations to get to meet one another and re-energize the movement that had succumbed in the face of violence.

Puerto Caicedo, where the women had gathered, had been the flourishing center of Putumayo's civil society until the arrival of the paramilitaries. It was here that ASMUN, Ruta Pacífica's focal point and the first women's organization in Putumayo, was born under the inspiring tutelage of Father Alcides Jiménez. But since the killing of their leader, fear had silenced the population. A silence they had come to break.

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While her body was being painted, Fatima had asked Nancy to help her prepare her speech. When she told her what she was determined to share with the crowd, Nancy stepped back: "Fatima, that's so dangerous," she warned.

"No, I want to tell these stories."

With her remarkable and charismatic presence, Fatima won the attention of the women standing in front of the covered stage, sweating under the blazing sun, filling up the town square surrounded by white houses and blooming trees.

"I want to tell you two stories about the conflict in Putumayo, Black Putumayo," she started while the people quieted down.

A teacher at a school located in the battle zone between paramilitary and guerrilla groups had decided to take her students into her own house after the paramilitary had threatened to recruit the children. One night she heard a knock on the door. She opened it to find the notorious paramilitary, nicknamed *orejas,* on her doorstep: He always wore a necklace with the ears of all the people he had slaughtered that day. He tried to enter the house, but the teacher resisted. "OK, don't worry," the man said. "But we will be back," underlining his threatening words by leaving his necklace on the handle of her door.

While the thousands of women stood in front of her in total silence, Fatima told them another story:

When the gas pump arrived in El Placer, paramilitaries descended from a white van with machetes in hand. In the presence of all those who were traveling through town on a bus, including Fatima, they started dismembering the assistant working the pump. His face was contorted with pain, fear and anguish, while his mother, a peasant, came to beg them to please not murder her son. It was 10 a.m. and the children were just getting out of school. Fatima got off the bus and ran as fast as she could to stop the children so they would not see what was happening.

With these words, Fatima had broken the public silence that had infiltrated Putumayo — the stories now evoking a screaming silence among the astonished crowd of women.

One of Ruta Pacífica's leaders from Bogotá was the next of the six women on stage. She told the story of Luz Maria, the founder of the Committee for the Rights of the People of Villacívica, an organization that had fought for social and economic rights of the community of Villagarzón since 1991. Upon the request of families, Luz Maria would intervene on behalf of people at risk of being

assassinated or disappeared, gathering a group of people to confront the paramilitaries — thus saving many lives.

Recently she had denounced the alliance between paramilitary and military groups at a local security council, and with that she had likely stretched their tolerance beyond the limit. At 6:30 that very morning of the demonstration, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Luz Maria was killed in front of her 7-year-old daughter and elderly mother.

A silence still held the crowd, but their cry for peace would now be louder than ever. For Nancy, everything fell into place. Hearing the stories of these brave women, admiring the courage of Ruta Pacífica's leaders to share them, and watching the crowd of women in front of her, she recognized what she had discovered in her mother and grandmother, but had never been able to name: the inner strength of Colombian women to stand against violence. Nancy realized that she and her organization needed to support this female fight for truth and justice. A struggle that was not without danger.

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After the main events of the day, they walked back to Puerto Caicedo's central square in procession. While Nancy headed for the church, she encountered a local leader in the swarm of women. As they continued their way together her friend pointed out, "Look at these men!"

Nancy saw six young guys standing in front of a corner shop, trying to hide among the crowds. They stood beside their motorcycles, revolvers tucked in their pants and partly covered by their t-shirts. Although they were not wearing their usual military uniforms in the presence of the national and international visitors, Nancy knew the style that immediately betrayed their identities.

She joined the group of women standing around the bench in front of the church and watched the paramilitaries. She could clearly see the grins on their faces, but felt only a fleeting fear. The women united made a world of difference. Together they stood strong. Nancy, tired of the endless routine of threats, violence and death, felt invigorated. She had found her new calling: uniting the women of Putumayo in their struggle for peace.

The Fire

Putumayo was caught in the grip of violence — violence targeting the civilian population and its leaders. The paramilitaries had taken control of the urban centers, the guerrilla dominated the rural areas. People from the countryside going to the towns were killed by the paramilitaries who considered them guerrilla informants. Those traveling from the urban centers to the rural areas were killed by the guerrilla who thought they were paramilitary informants.

The paramilitaries tried in vain to extend their control to the rural areas, committing massacres and large-scale assassinations. Hundreds of people disappeared, thousands were displaced. The counteroffensive by the FARC guerrilla group paralyzed the whole department. Under the months-long armed shutdown they declared, an unprecedented humanitarian crisis unfolded, marked by attacks on infrastructure — bridges were destroyed and electricity pylons and pipelines were blown up — limiting access to food and basic supplies, and prohibiting vehicles, even ambulances, from moving.

Amanda, Fatima, Nancy and a few other women had come together to think of an answer to this destructive crisis tearing apart the society of Putumayo. In the schools where they worked, Amanda and Fatima were confronted daily with the suffering of the children. Appalled at the impotence and lack of will of the Colombia government to bring an end to the situation, they decided to alter the fate of Putumayo on their own. The humanitarian aid they had managed to raise to guarantee food security for the children reassured them that they could make a difference. But how could they maintain the social fabric of their Putumayo?

"We must pay attention to what is happening with the women," Amanda affirmed. She told the other women about a remarkable development: Within only three days, a Swiss organization had found 65 women leaders and organizations in Putumayo.

The Ruta Pacífica demonstration in 2003 taught Nancy that when women join forces they can resist and confront the violence surrounding them. And for the last two years she had accompanied the local women as Asociación MINGA's representative in Putumayo. But the number of active women leaders and organizations that were blooming in these desperate times still came as a surprise.

They decided to identify the principal women leaders and organizations and strengthen their ties to foster peaceful coexistence in their department. As they started preparing for the next step, fundamental questions lingered in Nancy's mind: *Why women? Why is it women who try to maintain society and survive in the middle of the war?*

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In the large hotel parlor, the women sat behind tables circling the chimney in the center of the room. The Putumayan women were not used to the cold in La Cocha, Nariño, a neighboring department. But at least here it was safe to speak.

Nancy had spoken with Gloria, MINGA's director, and urged her to invest in their promising initiative to build a women's network in Putumayo. Right away Gloria adopted the idea, which fit perfectly with the organization's objective to empower local organizations, and spared no effort to make it work.

With the support of MINGA and other NGOs, agencies (Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres, Suippcol) and the departmental government, the principal leaders had managed to bring women from across Putumayo together in the beautiful surroundings of the green hills and crystal clear lake of La Cocha. Nancy wanted to indulge the women and receive them in an elegant hotel where, for once, waiters came to serve *them* coffee.

The FARC controlled the area and tourism was hit heavily, so Nancy was able to negotiate a discount with the hotel. They invited around 30 women leaders from Lower, Middle and Upper Putumayo and representatives of national human rights organizations to talk about the situation in Putumayo and solidify their plans for moving forward.

They divided the group to discuss the three different subjects they had identified: women and human rights during the armed conflict, women and social and political participation, and women and economic development. With Fatima, Nancy was leading the session on human rights and armed conflict. Nancy started with an overview of the humanitarian situation in Putumayo, discussing the fumigations, the massacres in Lower Putumayo, the threats and assassinations afflicting teachers and promoters of health, the staggering statistics of displacement. The representatives of the national NGOs encouraged them to take a gender perspective and consider the specifics of women living in this context. Then it was time for the Putumayan women to share their stories.

One of the women took the floor and told them the story of her husband. Every day he would leave to sell milk in El Placer in Lower Putumayo. One day several years before, he did not come home after his workday. The paramilitaries had taken him, accusing him of being a guerrilla informant. She had been crying for years, and while sharing her story with the other women the tears continued to flow.

The reality of Putumayo's conflict reverberated in the peaceful hills of La Cocha. The stories were seemingly endless — of massacres, disappearances, women looking for their husbands, sons or daughters killed by the paramilitaries, the oppressive social rules imposed on them. For Nancy, the stories were not new. Having worked at the Health Department, she was one of the few people from outside Putumayo who knew the true impact of the armed conflict in the region. But for the women of Upper Putumayo and Bogotá, it was the first time they had heard about the reality the women of Lower Putumayo lived on a daily basis. The others had witnessed the large influx from the area, but never truly understood the grave situation they had escaped.

It made them determined to act. All the women supported the idea of creating a departmental network of women's organizations and leaders. They agreed that the next step had to be a broader investigation of women's experiences, challenges and coping strategies in all of Putumayo's municipalities. It had to be an integrated process of workshops on gender rights, an exchange of experiences between organizations, and public events.

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Nancy's eyes were drawn to the elderly indigenous women sitting on the plastic chairs in their colorful clothes and jewelry: orange, yellow, blue. Their hands interlaced long threads, weaving and talking naturally overlapping. Some of them did not speak Spanish, but their daughters sat beside them serving as interpreters.

The community hall, where the mural of a tiger reminded them of the sacred indigenous ceremonies that were held there, was open on the sides, and the peach palm trees encircling it gave Nancy the feeling of being in the middle of nature. The space was part of the Casa Cofán, a center where five indigenous groups from surrounding reservations came together to build a common agenda. It was located on the side of a byway leading out of La Hormiga, the urban center of Valle de Guamuez, and into the green mountains.

Nancy was sitting behind a table facing the women, in front of her a camera and laptop to record the workshop. The weaving women reminded her of the hard work they had done over the last few years, how the women had taken charge to maintain and strengthen Putumayo's social fabric. In her work for MINGA — an indigenous word meaning "working together," in this case for human rights — Nancy devoted most of her time to building and strengthening the network they founded in 2005, the Putumayo Women's Alliance: Weavers of Life.

Nancy supported the organization in all aspects, from resources and logistics to empowerment through gender and human rights workshops, events and economic projects, from the protection of the women leaders to raising awareness about the situation and work of women in Putumayo to a national and international audience. The entire time she was looking for the best way to accompany grassroots organizations as a human rights worker from a national organization, and how to build bridges between the local, national and international levels.

After their meeting in La Cocha, the principal leaders and Nancy split up in teams to visit the 13 municipalities of Putumayo. They found an overwhelming number of women leaders from a wide variety of organizations, who were all interested in the idea of a departmental women's network — a way to carry forward Father Alcides' proposal. They organized trainings with the core leaders who could pass the acquired skills and knowledge on to their organizations and communities. They gave the leaders the responsibility to involve local women in the process and mobilize them for participation in the comprehensive research they were preparing. Ruta Pacífica and the organization *Mujer y Conflicto* helped them to develop the methodology for this participatory research, and in 2007 they carried out the first in the urban areas of Putumayo.

Two years later, with the financial support of Institute CICODE (*Centro de Iniciativas de Cooperación al Desarrollo de la Universidad de Granada, España*), they extended the research and workshops to the countryside. Using all possible means of transportation, they traveled to the remote corners of the department to listen to the stories of women, share experiences and transform their pain into rights. Nancy and her colleagues visited communities that had literally turned into battlefields, where paramilitaries, guerrilla, the army and drug gangs were fighting a war against the population. In Puerto Colón, on the border with Ecuador, the village had been overtaken by paramilitaries and subsequently bombed by the FARC until everything was destroyed. But more

than the destructive force of violence, Nancy was impressed by the resilience displayed by the Afro-Colombian women of the village.

The indigenous women who had gathered in the Casa Cofán added more stories to the many she had heard, fascinating Nancy with their colorful words and fabrics. They expressed their close relation with nature, and how the fumigations endangered this connection — threatening to destroy what was most valuable to them. The pesticides killed the plants, trees and animals in their reservations — where coca crops were not even grown — and drove the spirits into the jungle.

The level of domestic violence was one of the most surprising outcomes of their research; the indigenous women told them they how they suffered from physical and psychological violence in their homes. One of the women said that her husband could beat her, day and night, but that it didn't matter to her — the next day her body would have recovered. But hurting her with his words, she said, killed her dignity. She felt as if she were dying inside.

From the beginning of her work with the women of Putumayo, Nancy had asked herself why women were the ones who kept going amid violence and adversity. But four years into the process and having heard hundreds of women's stories, she was still looking for an answer.

As in her previous workshops, she asked the indigenous women of Valle de Guamuez the same question: "How can you live under these high levels of violence? Why are you, women, always the ones who keep working to protect life?"

One of the young women translated for her mother: "Because it is our responsibility to keep the fire burning."

A CONVERSATION WITH NANCY SÁNCHEZ

The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Sara Koenders and an interview during a public event by IPJ Executive Director Milburn Line on Oct. 23, 2012.

Q: When did you realize you wanted to be a human rights defender?

A: I think it's all about love. I fell in love. I fell in love with a beautiful process of peace in Colombia. It was a proposal made by *campesinos*. It wasn't the proposal of the government. It wasn't a proposal of the armed actors. It was about the campesinos, peasants, in Carare Opón, a region near my home.

These campesinos were tired of all the violence and they wanted the territory free of armed actors. It was so amazing. They wanted to bring the attention of the national government to invest economically in this area. They stood in front of the guerrilla and the paramilitaries and the military and said, "I don't want you to be here." And I fell in love.

But in the end it was too much and they were killed, with a well-known journalist that I admired so much, Silvia Duzán, by a paramilitary group. Silvia Duzán was the best journalist in my country at that time. They were killed.

I think at that moment I took the decision to do something because my impotence became anger. I needed to do something.

Q: How old were you?

A: 20 years old.

Q: You were still in university? Was this an internship

A: Yes, still in university. But my internship was in CREDHOS, in Barrancabermeja. I was looking for an internship before this proposal [of the campesinos] fell apart. I was looking to do something. I went to Barrancabermeja. It's an old city in Colombia, and at that time was the most violent city in Colombia.

"… I realized this is not my internship. It was like a PhD in human rights because I learned all that I needed to do in the rest of my years in human rights."

This was my internship, but I went to Barrancabermeja and I realized this is not my internship. It was like a PhD in human rights because I learned all that I needed to do in the rest of my years in human rights. In CREDHOS I was responsible for a bulletin in human rights. I needed to document

all the cases of human rights violations. In the rural areas the military force bombed the small towns. In the city of Barrancabermeja there were many people killed in the dirty war, and there were many disappeared persons. One of the tasks that I had was to register all the unidentified dead bodies.

And I needed to take pictures. At that time we didn't have the digital cameras, no zoom. It was a manual one without zoom. And I had to take the horrible pictures of a dead body, to keep this person in a database. Through CREDHOS there were many people looking for disappeared persons, and I needed to show this so you could recognize your family, your relative in this database.

But it was too much; always it's too much. In the committee we were seven persons. Three of them, [and who were] my best friends too, were killed. The other one needed to leave the country. At the end we were two persons. And I needed to leave.

Q: Where did you go?

A: To Bogotá. A friend of mine in another NGO of human rights always would say to me, "Nancy, Nancy, it's too dangerous." I think I was 22 years old. I was so bored in my work in Bogotá because I had to read all the newspapers and count all the dead.

Q: That was your job?

A: Yes, for a database of human rights violations. I told my boss, "I need activity." When I went to Barrancabermeja, the first opportunity they gave me I took without thinking. He told me there was an opportunity in Putumayo. And I said yes without thinking. Then I had to look at the map — where is Putumayo? I remember I was in the plane and I realized that the pilot of the plane needed to pay attention to a cow during the landing. It was so funny. But I found the rural areas of Colombia are like that: without electricity, without roads. There is nothing. I remember that there were no computers. I needed to work in a little office in the Committee of Human Rights and I worked with a big typewriter.

"He told me there was an opportunity in Putumayo. And I said yes without thinking. Then I had to look at the map — where is Putumayo?"

Q: What year was this?

A: 1994, 1995. My work was the same. I needed to do a bulletin of human rights. I found a region with plenty of coca crops. There are thousands of campesinos who are growing coca crops as a way of life. It's normal in this region, abandoned by the state, because there is nothing; there are no opportunities. The only opportunity was the illegal economy. They needed to survive so they grow coca crops. And I learned why it is a problem. And then I fell in love again.

Q: In Putumayo?

A: Yes, in Putumayo with a beautiful proposal of Father Alcides Jiménez. He was an amazing human rights defender. He made a beautiful proposal with the campesinos to develop alternatives to coca crops. The culture of coca is really violent: guns, arms. They worked in this.

But at the end, again, the worse came. The paramilitary groups came to Putumayo in 1998 and they started to kill, brutally exterminate people. The guerrilla FARC reacted in a violent way and put civil society in the middle. Father Alcides took the decision to say, "No, you can't go with the paramilitaries, you can't go with the guerrilla group. You must be neutral in this conflict." But Father Alcides was killed by the guerrilla group in 1998. He was killed in the same way as Oscar Romero in El Salvador — in front of all the people during mass. And the process stopped.

But the worst was coming because at that time, in 2000, the U.S. government decided with my government in Colombia to start the war on drugs. And then the war on drugs changed. If you remember — my generation remembers — the war on drugs was focused on the big cartels: Pablo Escobar, the Medellín cartel. But in this period they decided that the war against drugs should be against the producer, the little farmers who are growing coca. So at that time we really had a humanitarian crisis, a very big humanitarian crisis, because on the ground you have the guerrilla group [imposing] an armed strike: all the transportation stopped, all the economic activities stopped.

Q: Like martial law?

A: Something like that. And in the air we have fumigation. The majority of the resources of Plan Colombia are invested in fumigating coca crops. But [it affects] not only coca crops, but the Amazon, the beautiful Amazon. All the people there are really sick. The children are sick. And then I needed to leave.

Q: Because you were in danger or because of the chemicals?

A: No, not because of the chemicals. I brought attention to what happened in Putumayo. I published, and I talked with my friends in the United States, "What is it about this U.S. aid? Why is it coming against the poor people, animals and environment?" I made a big report of human rights violations because the paramilitaries were taking all the towns in Putumayo. Sometimes one or two members of paramilitary groups stood in front of my office.

I left for one year and then I came back in 2002. I started to work with my best friend, Gloria Flórez, the best human rights defender that I have met in my life. She pushed me, "You must go to Putumayo again." I said, "OK, I'll try to." But I didn't find much. I needed to restart, to begin again, to look where the leaders are, where is the process, what happened with the people, what happened with the organizations.

I fell in love again, [this time] with the women's organizations. I dedicated a part of my life to denouncing Plan Colombia and the impact and the effect on the people on the ground. And the other big part of my life I worked with women.

Q: You have always been looking for what your role in human rights work should be. You've said that you want to link the local with the national and the international levels. How did you make that link?

A: The link was because of Gloria Flórez in MINGA, in 1998 or 1999, because she had a lot of connections, and she tried to connect the reality on the ground with the national and international levels.

I met Gloria in a bar in Bogotá where all the human rights workers go. The first time was when I came back from Barrancabermeja and lived in Bogotá for one year, 1993. In 1996 I called her to help me in Putumayo because I didn't have the relations on the national level and I knew she had many. With her we saved a lot of lives. She helped me to save a nurse, children — she helped me a lot in the protection of the people.

"In 1996 I called [Gloria] to help me in Putumayo because I didn't have the relations on the national level and I knew she had many. With her we saved a lot of lives."

She made an alliance with CINEP and Dasalud (Health Administrative Department of Putumayo), and we did research on human rights in 1997 and 1998. We published a big report on the humanitarian situation and human rights violations, and the situation in Putumayo started to be visible at the national level. With Plan Colombia when the fumigation started, Gloria worked very hard to bring it to international attention. And with her we organized two big events in Puerto Asís, with many organizations.

The first [international] connection I got was in Costa Rica, when I got out of Putumayo in an ambulance. There was a big humanitarian situation in 2000, when Plan Colombia started, and the guerrilla made a big military offensive and nobody could move, not even the ambulances.

That moment it was so hard in Putumayo, and Gloria led a big event in Costa Rica that offered a place for peace negotiations with the government, the international community and the FARC and the ELN. She invited me, and this was the first time I got out of the country. At first I said, "No, no, no, I can't because I can't move, really I can't move." I don't know how she found an ambulance, but she ordered me, "You must, because the problem in Putumayo is really big and we need the person on the ground."

When we were in the ambulance the guerrilla stopped us and asked if we had a patient (of course, I was the patient in those circumstances). But finally I got to an airport near Putumayo. I got to this meeting, and this meeting was really important because we put the Putumayo situation in this event. I met Adam Isacson at this — he worked for the Center for International Policy [CIP] and now he works for WOLA [Washington Office on Latin America] — and after that I met so many

organizations from the United States, like Witness for Peace. I invited him and so many people and we started to work together on Plan Colombia.

Winifred Tate is a special case. I met her when she lived in Colombia. She was the first "crazy gringa" who visited Putumayo in 1999, when the paramilitaries arrived in Puerto Asís. We observed the armed men in trucks, moving through the main roads. We also visited some rural areas where the guerrillas still controlled the community with rules, taxes and penalties. I remember taking a photo of a poster of the FARC specifying the amounts for taxes and penalties. They imposed heavy fines for infidelity to your husband or wife, for example, or for having drunk too much. After this adventure, Winifred and I became very good friends.

The work of these organizations was to monitor the U.S. military aid in all the countries where it has interests. And at that moment that was Putumayo and Plan Colombia. The first U.S. military strategy in Colombia was "Push into the South," and it was then that they created the first military battalion against drugs. The commander of this battalion was General [Mario] Montoya. When he was in Putumayo, in 2000, he had the military base in Santana, and only 5 kilometers away was Villa Sandra [the most important paramilitary base in Putumayo], and everyone knew that the military and paramilitary worked in coordination.

[José Miguel] Vivanco, chief of Human Rights Watch for the Americas, made a report in 2001 about the situation in Putumayo and two other places; the report was called "The Sixth Division."[8] In Colombia the official number of military divisions is five, and the sixth division is the paramilitary division. And they made a big report on the story that I know so well.

In 2007 the U.S. Congress questioned why a mass grave was found in Putumayo containing more than 100 victims of the paramilitary, murdered between 1999 and 2001 — the same period when Montoya was in charge of that area as the commander of Joint Task Force South, a U.S.-funded unit. There have been testimonies of paramilitaries about his involvement in violations of human rights in Putumayo and other parts of the country when he was commander.

In 2008, Montoya resigned as head of the army because he had been linked to extrajudicial executions of young men from Soacha; these are cases of "false positives," in which Colombian soldiers killed hundreds of innocent civilians and dressed them in guerilla clothing in order to inflate the body count. The office of the Attorney General is now investigating more than 2,000 executions committed by members of the security forces over the last few decades. For that, I always want to have proof against this general. This is really someone who needs to be in the International Criminal Court.

Q: Your last project with MINGA was *Monitoreo Ciudadano Internacional del Modelo de Acción Integral*. Can you explain what that project is about, how you organized it and what the outcome was?

A: The project was with two NGOs from the United States, WOLA and CIP, and two NGOs from Colombia, Indepaz and MINGA. It was about monitoring U.S. aid on the ground in Colombia, a new Plan Colombia. The project was to visit Tumaco in Nariño, Montes de Maria on the Atlantic

coast, and La Macarena in Meta, to have the contrast between three areas where the strategy was implemented.

We started little by little to learn how this strategy was working on the ground. The aid was given to the military to give it more responsibility in social issues — to work with the community, to empower the community, to bring health service, to bring school service, to build bridges, to build roads.

They divided the country in three zones, like a traffic light. The red zone is where they think there is only a military option, that there are no social or economic options for the people. They put all their forces into fumigation, eradication — and they put more brigades in this area. Once they have "cleaned the area of the armed actors," the strategy becomes yellow, where the official military begins a financial intervention and gives direct support to the communities (micro-projects for social and economic development). Then finally is green, where all the social and economic institutions come to invest in the area under the coordination of the armed forces: education, health for displaced people, for the victims, etc.

This is the idea, which is good on paper. But on the ground the military has the principal responsibility to give this help, this aid on the ground. And for that, it's a change of Plan Colombia. We went to this place where they were supposed to do a pilot project in the zone of the guerrilla, La Macarena, a historic place of the guerrilla groups.

We found that it was the military that gave the social aid, and this strategy had a purpose of social and territorial control by the military, not by the state. And now La Macarena doesn't have a social and economic state, just a military presence — and the military provides the social aid. You use the people, because the people really need some public service. You use the people to win the information to control the population. In this context they put the people in the middle of the armed conflict.

For example, one leader needed to build a bridge to connect a road. To get this bridge the leader needed to contact the military. The military builds this bridge, and then the guerrilla says to the leader, "Why did you bring the military here?" and they kill the leader. This is the story. There are many stories like that. Only the military has the money, not the mayor or the government. That was our principal criticism of the new strategy: They are putting the people in the middle of the conflict.

"That was our principal criticism of the new strategy: They are putting the people in the middle of the conflict."

The four NGOs wrote several reports on the results of the visits and interviews with government agencies. Adam Isacson posted on the webpage http://ccai-colombia.org and he spread the report to all the institutions. It was a good opportunity because he really is one of the experts on Colombia and all the people read his work. They know that he went to the ground and talked with the people.

That has credibility and it was in the newspaper and it's really big. I don't know if it will change anything but people will pay attention to the situation.

Q: Tell me about your work for the Andean Parliament.

A: I work with Gloria Flórez, a member of the Andean Parliament. My responsibility is especially for human rights — for example, when I started work I needed to research and write a denouncement like "15 boys and girls recruited by the FARC." It was a big scandal in Colombia because nobody has the courage to confront and denounce this reality.

Also, I work with women; Gloria introduced me to the work of the women in the Caribbean in the north of the country. And we now try to bring them together and have them share experiences, the north with the south. She tries to put together all the Andean parliamentarians, women parliamentarians, also from the south — Argentina, Chile — for a big event about the situation of women and to build a common agenda.

The Andean Parliament consists of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile. Argentina is not part of the Andean region; they have a different parliament and they work with us in some specific subjects. This is a challenge for next year, to push more to put together all the initiatives of all the parliaments in Latin America. Gloria wants to include Central America, too — especially on femicide. There is a worsening level of femicide, in Mexico especially. And these are my next responsibilities.

It's interesting. I get to see the situation of women in Bolivia, in Peru. I talk with the parliamentarians and I read reports. I think it's good to learn about this. For example, regarding political participation: which country has more opportunities for the women, which country does not? It's amazing. For example, in Bolivia the women have a law for political participation, half and half. They recently installed a law that protects the right to political participation of women. There are a lot of organizations that support the president of Bolivia, Evo Morales.

Q: Peace talks are underway between the FARC and the government. Does news about those developments make it to the campesinos in the rural areas? Does it mean anything to the people?

A: This is a good question. Being here, the process started all the questions about that: the peace, the peace, the peace. My heart wants peace always. Always we work with the organizations for peace. But my principal question is, what kind of peace is this? Peace without the participation of civil society, without women's organizations? I don't like this kind of peace. Peace is about [addressing] the inequalities, the discrimination — the social, economic and political discrimination. It's about the narcotraffic, too. It's about the corruption in my government. We need to put those subjects on the table.

"… what kind of peace is this? Peace without the participation of civil society, without women's organizations? I don't like this kind of peace."

So the campesinos think [the peace process] doesn't change anything. Right now in Putumayo we have an armed strike by the guerrilla group, a state of siege. This is what happens on the ground. The people don't feel any change.

Q: Why is it so important to report on disappearances? What have you done to bring attention to the subject?

A: For me it's the worst crime. This is the worst crime someone can commit against another person. The family member of the victim, of the disappeared person, has a right to know what happened. He or she could have been assassinated or not. You kill these people or disappear these people, but you kill the whole family too. For that, I think it's important to work on this — and because this crime was committed for many, many years in Colombia. It's the crime of silence that was committed but that nobody talked about. Nobody, only recently.

There is an organization, Fundación Nydia Erika Bautista. My friend, Janet Bautista — the sister of Nydia Erika, one of the first persons to be disappeared in Colombia — started the battle for the rights of disappeared persons in 1987. But she needed to get out of the country (this was also in 1987). She came back in 2007 to start again. Now we have a law on disappeared persons, and there is a commission at a high level to look at disappeared persons and to try to have a database of disappeared persons, an official database to give the opportunity to relatives to look for their loved ones.

The reality of the disappeared persons started to be known in Colombia with the Justice and Peace Law. The Uribe administration used this law as an opportunity for the paramilitaries to demobilize [by giving them amnesty]. The demobilization was between 2005 and 2007.

The paramilitaries that wanted to benefit from the law talked about so many mass graves, and the country started to know that there were many mass graves all over the country. In Putumayo the Office of the Attorney General found one of the biggest mass graves. The prosecutor general at that time said that there could be 3,000 people in mass graves in just four municipalities of Lower Putumayo: in La Hormiga, Puerto Asís, Puerto Caicedo and Orito.

The people in Colombia started to know, and the victims started to talk because they wanted to know, "What happened with my son? What happened?" I can't imagine, all this time keeping your pain because all the people are scared to talk. We know that when someone is disappeared, it's possible that person could be dead but the people need to bury [him or her]. This is a right. It's different from when your family member or colleague was killed but you are able to bury them. You are able to mourn. With the disappeared person, no — the family is not able to mourn.

I started to understand this crime when I was in Putumayo. I knew so many cases of disappeared indigenous people. When the paramilitary arrived there was a big scandal because there were massacres and they killed a lot of people. But they changed the strategy in 2000 — I think because of the human rights reports at that time — and started the crime of silence: to disappear people.

With the disappeared person, the family doesn't complain, the media doesn't say anything because the people don't know what happened — they don't have the proof of the body. And the family doesn't make it a scandal because they always have the hope of finding the person and they are always scared of the paramilitary. They still have the hope that the paramilitary would say, "OK, I want to give you your son." This is a perfect crime. The worst one, and perfect. And for that I started to work.

Gloria was the best friend of Janet, and Janet was one of the founders of MINGA. When she came back to the country Gloria introduced me and she told me that she knew there was the problem [of disappearances] in Putumayo. We made an alliance with Fundación Erika to work on the disappeared. We worked with the new law and we had a lot of meetings and workshops in Putumayo with the women, with the indigenous people, and made two reports about disappeared persons.

But this, I think, is really the perfect crime, and a crime for so many people. You kill the victim, you disappear the victim — but you kill 10 persons more.

"This … is really the perfect crime, and a crime for so many people. You kill the victim, you disappear the victim — but you kill 10 persons more."

Q: Do you think you are under surveillance because of the work you do?

A: I think so, but more because of my work in the United States; the government really pays attention to that. The worst thing you could do about the violations of human rights that my government commits is to raise it here in the United States. For example, in 2007, Senator Patrick Leahy froze $55.2 million in military aid to Colombia because of the accusations against General Montoya. There was a big scandal, and then the Uribe government ordered the *Departamento Adminitrativo de Seguridad*, DAS, to follow all the human rights defenders and judges and intercept their phones. I have the letter from the *Fiscalía* [public prosecutor] telling me that they opened an investigation against the DAS because they noticed that I was followed for about two years. I have a big file that I gave to some lawyers from MINGA. It was like, "Wow, this is my life."

Q: The DAS collected all that information?

A: Even the color of my eyes. It's amazing. All the conversations that I had on the phone and in my home. One time, when I used to live in the historic center of Bogotá and I had my little apartment, at 3 o'clock in the morning policemen entered my house without a [warrant]. At that moment

Fatima[9] was there [from Putumayo], because she was in Bogotá and stayed in my home. She was amazing; she acted like a mom. "What do you have to do with my daughter?" And the policemen said, "Oh, you are …?" "Yes, I am the mom, what is happening?" They checked all my books, all my files. Then when I saw the DAS file I knew I was followed. Before, I had no idea.

Q: How do you feel about that?

A: I don't have anything to hide. That I learned from Gloria. You have to be open. It is possible they will put false testimonies or false proof. This I fear a little bit because maybe someday there will be an order to bring me to jail and we'll need the time to prove the contrary, but at that moment I would need to stay in jail. That's a big problem in Colombia. There are many leaders in jail because of false testimonies.

Q: Do you think DAS is still wiretapping you?

A: I don't know. It could be. It could be, but I pay attention to the security of other people, not my own. Because if I only pay attention to my security, I might forget the others.

BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING

Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Leaders

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Avert the danger to the person under threat by taking immediate action	Immediate action could involve moving the person in danger outside of the risk area and to a safe place. Time is critical. The decision of what is to be done must be taken by consensus, involving a swift consultation with the human rights network that is familiar with the context and the person under threat, and can assess the danger. Always have a back-up plan. The network must keep in mind the families of the person under threat. The network must find necessary humanitarian aid, such as transportation, food, clothes, etc.	In one case, a woman leader of a peasant organization, who lived near the Ecuadorian border, was falsely accused of a crime and was in danger of being arrested. Nancy, in consultation with the network, made a plan to move the woman and her family out of the community for a time. Nancy accompanied her to Ecuador and arranged for the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to accommodate her stay.
Research and advocate	Once the person is safe, research can begin. It is necessary to publicly report the case in order to increase security for those involved. Based on the research, request increased protection and judicial investigation from the appropriate institutions.	Send urgent action letters to bring the case to the attention of national and international actors. Contact the office of the president and the human rights unit of the prosecutor general's office.
Monitor the situation	Security is far from guaranteed. Continue to monitor the situation after the initial threat has been avoided. Always be attentive, and consider the consequences of an absence of leaders in a community or organization.	

Empowerment of Women and Communities

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Seek out leaders	Search for women leaders by holding meetings with grassroots organizations. If leaders or organizations cannot be found, seek out other central figures in the community, such as teachers, nurses and religious leaders.	The first step in building the Putumayo Women's Alliance was to identify the women community leaders already present in the department.
Research and document	Research and documentation should always be a participatory process with the victims of human rights violations, as well as witnesses and leaders. Concerning the situation of women, documentation is used to demonstrate the high levels of generalized violence, but also to help change the women's perspective about their situation through education and awareness.	In the process of building the alliance, two principal research projects were carried out in 2007 and 2009. These used a Participatory Action Research methodology and had a political objective: the transformation of women's lives. The first research project focused on urban areas, the second on rural areas of Putumayo, and were divided into three subjects: women and economics; women and domestic violence and armed conflict; and women and social/political participation.
Education	Conversations, meetings and workshops are organized to stimulate women's thinking about their own, sometimes violent, stories; to build their self-esteem; to raise awareness about women's rights and existing laws; and elevate political consciousness. The workshops include three elements: share your own story; listen to others' stories; transform pain into rights.	The principal goal of the alliance in working with women was the "recuperation of the word" — expressing what happened and why. Members of the alliance went to both rural and urban areas to listen to the stories of women, talk about the precarious situation they live in, and look for ways to encourage the women not

	Educational courses can also be developed.	to give up. In 2011, the alliance partnered with a Colombian university to offer a certificate in gender and social development, women's rights and an emphasis on projects and development.
Share experiences	Organizations should exchange knowledge about their work, difficulties they have faced, and solutions they found. This will help to build a network for protection and solidarity.	The alliance organized visits between, for example, an indigenous organization with a peasant one; women's organizations that work in different microcredit projects; and between women's organizations from Putumayo and Ecuador.
Build an agenda	This should be a participatory process involving the principal representatives of the organizations who will decide priorities for work for the coming year.	The alliance held one to two events per year and developed an annual plan through consensus. For the past two years, the plan involved working on the rights of women victims of violence; land rights; and the dissemination and implementation of Law 1257 (2008), on preventing and eliminating violence against women in Colombia.
Symbolic acts and demonstrations	These can raise the profile of women and increase understanding of their situation in the conflict. They can include public art and theater, or marches and public protests.	In October 2011, the alliance organized a mass demonstration to commemorate and honor women victims of violence — in particular the four daughters of Blanca who were disappeared by a paramilitary group in 2000. Aspects of the demonstration included a

		march with national and local women's organizations; empty chairs with the names of women victims displayed in a public space; and the building of a wall with the names of women who had been killed or disappeared painted on it.
Microcredit and other economic projects	Support the creation and sustainment of different types of small-scale economic projects for women, thus contributing to their livelihoods and independence.	Nancy helped gather enough resources to buy a piece of land that now serves as a community farm for a group of women.

Advocacy

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE	DESCRIPTION
Accompany missions on the ground	When national or international delegations arrive for informational or fact-finding missions, they should be accompanied by someone on the ground.	Nancy has accompanied many such delegations, including the U.S.-based Witness for Peace, in order to show them the effects of Plan Colombia on the civilian population.
Lobby	Lobbying should be done at the national level with the government and civil society, and at the international level with powerful governments such as those in the United States and Europe.	In 2007, Nancy accompanied a delegation of women to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in Washington, D.C., where they presented on the grave human rights situation in Putumayo. In 2010, with the support of Amnesty International, Nancy and two of the Mothers of Soacha — women whose sons had been killed by the Colombian military — traveled throughout Europe to bring attention to the case of "False Positives."
Document and raise awareness	On the ground in communities, document the situation by recording testimonies of victims, interviewing authorities and organizing community	In 2003, Nancy made a series of video shorts documenting the consequences of the fumigations in Putumayo, in order to raise awareness in the United States about the impact of the U.S.-funded Plan Colombia.

	workshops. Write reports and bulletins about the situation that can be used for advocacy purposes and raising awareness.	

Justice

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Documentation	Oftentimes, prosecutors find it too dangerous to travel to certain areas and must rely on local organizations and individuals to collect evidence to support a particular case of violations of human rights. This may include taking testimonies from victims and witnesses, interviewing others involved, and visually recording the scene or situation to give the prosecutor and judge insight into the context of the crime.	One particular case involved the extrajudicial execution of a child in the rural area of Puerto Asís. Nancy and a lawyer went to the area to investigate the case after receiving information from a local peasant organization. They recorded the testimony of the father, and Nancy filmed and took photos of the landscape and the house with bullet holes in it. Nancy wrote a public statement refuting the military version of the incident, which claimed that the child had been killed in combat with the guerillas.
Connect people with the judicial system	Build confidence in people so they are comfortable approaching institutions like the Office of the Attorney General. Connect the victim or family of the victim with a lawyer. Provide information on the progress of the case to the victim and/or family.	In the incident described above, the parents of the child were living close to the military base and the mother had been hospitalized in a military hospital, so they were afraid to speak out. Nancy worked with the family to encourage them and build their confidence in officially denouncing the violation.
Provide social and psychological support	Victims and their relatives will have a great need for this during the judicial process.	The Putumayo Women's Alliance offers support to the relatives of the disappeared, in some cases referring them to other organizations that can provide psychological assistance.

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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER — Sara Koenders

Sara Koenders holds a B.S. in cultural anthropology and an M.A. in conflict studies and human rights, both from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. She has written extensively about social inequalities and the human and political dimensions of violence, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. For her bachelor's thesis she researched local politics and political participation in an indigenous town in post-conflict Guatemala. Her master's research in Brazil focused on the coping strategies of women trying to raise their children in a Rio de Janeiro shantytown marked by violence, fear and insecurity. Koenders was also a civic integration consultant in her home country the Netherlands, and she worked to raise awareness about life in conflict situations.

In 2010, she worked as a peace writer with Woman PeaceMaker Vaiba Kebeh Flomo of Liberia and wrote the narrative "The Bullet Cannot Pick and Choose." She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Amsterdam and a recipient of the 2013 Drugs, Security and Democracy Fellowship through the Social Science Research Council. Her research is on the impact of favela "pacification" on local relations, violence, insecurity and drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Mrs. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ACRONYMS

ACSOMAYO	Peasant Association of Southern Putumayo
ASMUN	Association of Women of the Municipality of Puerto Caicedo
ATCC	Association of Peasant Workers of Carare
AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
CICODE	Center of Initiatives for Development Cooperation
CINEP	Center of Research and Popular Education
CIP	Center for International Policy
CREDHOS	Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights
DAS	Department of Administrative Security
Dasalud	Health Department
ELN	National Liberation Army
EPL	Popular Liberation Army
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IPJ	Institute for Peace & Justice
MAS	Death to Kidnappers
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PTJ	Judicial Technical Police
UP	Patriotic Union Party
WOLA	Washington Office on Latin America

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

[2] See the Further Reading section for sources used in the Conflict History and Integrated Timeline.

[3] Magdalena Medio Laboratory of Peace, a social and economic development program led by the Catholic Church and financed by the European Union.

[4] In October 1991, Jorge received the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington for his work at CREDHOS.

[5] "Colombian Guns, U.S. Blood." *New York Times*, January 28, 1992 www.nytimes.com/1992/01/28/opinion/colombian-blood-us-guns.html

[6] Title derived from the book "*Semillas de Paz. La Obra de El Padre Alcides Jiménez en el Putumayo*" (Puerto Caicedo, Colombia, 2010). See this book for further reading on the life and work of Father Alcides Jiménez.

[7] Father Alcides used education and public demonstrations, marches and meetings to promote this idea of active neutrality and to create a nonviolent culture in which indifference was not an option. His proposal of active neutrality was based on the following principles and requirements: 1) Civil disobedience, meaning that there should be neither direct nor indirect participation with any of the armed actors (military, paramilitaries or guerrillas); 2) Hold only humanitarian dialogues with the armed actors; 3) Do not carry or possess guns; 4) Do not provide information to any of the armed actors; 5) Search for alternatives to coca production; 6) Be willing to develop work with and for the community; 7) Report acts of injustice that are committed.

[8] www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2001/colombia/6theng.pdf

[9] Fatima's role in the women's organizations is described in the story "Screaming Silence."