

“The Peace of *Mama Kiwe* in Freedom, of the Woman
Unchained and Unsilenced”:
The Meaning of Peace in Colombia from Indigenous
Cauca

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“The Peace of *Mama Kiwe*¹ in Freedom, of the Woman Unchained and Unsilenced”: the Meaning of Peace in Colombia from Indigenous Cauca

Vilma Almendra Quiguanás²

Count on us for peace... never for war. Over and over again, the Nasa people of Cauca have declared this from our territories in southwest Colombia. We have directed these words at the faces of all the armed actors in the conflict, who for decades have been killing and displacing us from our territories. These words haunt my thoughts as I reflect and write about the kind of peace we seek in Colombia and the end to the armed conflict here and across the continent. Where else to begin but from the voices and feelings of my *compañer@s*, the people I know and who are from where I’m from, where we live at the mercy of the armed groups.

I write from the perspective of a woman forced to live the realities of military occupation, from the daily terror of a war that continues so that powerful national and transnational corporate entities may continue to accumulate wealth. I write from those of us who suffer the consequences of the laws of dispossession, made and undone by political institutions forever tied to economic elites dedicated to the reinforcement of their own privilege. I write from those of us who are impoverished, murdered, exiled, robbed of our land, criminalized, persecuted and stigmatized for demanding what is ours. I write from all of us who protect and weave our consciousness with that of others, both within and outside our local social and political processes, to continue walking with our communities without becoming subsumed by every level of propaganda that the “powerful” use to co-opt, buy, divide and delegitimize us, our resistances and alternatives for life.

In relating this story, I must first weave together some of the many stories of suffering and resistance endured in our territories, from those of centuries ago to those being repeated now. The past is present. While those who now seek to eliminate us are not the same material authors as before, their strategies of terror serve the same purpose: to weaken the struggles and proposals expressed and nurtured through our community processes, our “Life Plans”³. The differences end there: we are currently witnessing the same intellectual authors advance and efficiently execute strategies with a recurrent objective: the economic “Death Project.” There are too many stories, and as I think about where to begin and what to share, I suddenly

¹ Trans.: *Mama Kiwe* signifies “Mother Earth” in *Nasa Yuwe*, the ancestral language of the Nasa people.

² Vilma Rocío Almendra Quiguanás is a Nasa-Misak from northern Cauca, Colombia. She is a grassroots social communicator by experience and a journalist by training. Almendra Quiguanás “walks the word” with social and community processes as a way of contributing to the Minga of Thought taking place in support of their Life Plans.

³ Trans.: The “Planes de Vida” of the communities in northern Cauca refer to the diverse projects and mobilizations that constitute the social and political community process of the indigenous peoples in the region. Almendra’s undergraduate thesis (later published) provides a cogent outline and analysis of these concepts. See: Almendra, Vilma (2009). *Palabra y acción para la movilización*. <http://foros.uexternado.edu.co/ecoinstitucional/index.php/comciu/article/viewFile/1839/1645>

feel the task of choosing one or two to be redundant. In Cauca, our histories, experiences, lives and daily practices of sadness and joy that nourish and build our Life Plans already constitute the fabric of life that strengthens our resolve and allows us to stand with others. We bring these experiences together every day, not by choice but as a means for our continued existence in our territories.

I must acknowledge that indigenous peoples are not the lone victims of this economic Death Project; there are also *campesinos*, Afro-Colombian communities and the many other popular social sectors in the country that share our reality. For better or for worse, we no longer live alone or in isolation; we share a sense of dignity and community with those who suffer as we do. We are all displaced to the cities, forced to beg for charity. We all miss someone – a relative, a friend, a neighbour, or a companion – murdered by one armed actor or another or pressured into giving in to the dark but thriving world of drugs to escape our collective “reality.”

We can't walk with peace and harmony in our own territory; the armed groups are everywhere. We can't grow food for ourselves; the land has been invaded by monocrops. We can't enjoy what used to be common; all has been privatized and sold off to transnational companies. We can't demand our rights and denounce murders; we're labeled as terrorists. We live in a terrible, sinking reality, waiting for it to be “our turn,” a day that has already arrived for many of those we've known and others whom we've never had the chance to know.

Even so, in spite of everything that pushes us towards death, we continue resisting by proposing and contributing to our organizations, processes and communities. In spite of our most absurd contradictions, we stand stubborn in our desire to continue our existence in this place. We are firm in our conviction that it is a vital necessity to balance and harmonize all of life with Mother Earth. Yet as we take our collective stand in our territories, we are being drained of blood through wounds created by the impacts of economic, social and political torturers acting in the name of the economic Death Project for the exploitation of life.

In the words that follow, I recount some of the many crimes against humanity perpetrated by death squads operating under the so-called United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), better known in Colombia and elsewhere as “the paramilitaries.” These groups are perhaps best understood not through the experiences of their victims, stories that echo in disparate contexts throughout the continent, but rather through the confessions of their top commanders, particularly those who have been extradited to the United States. I also narrate some violent acts carried out by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the *guerrilla*. Most of the testimonies I share here are from the Nasa indigenous communities of northern Cauca. While they are victims of violence in Colombia, the communities are not passive. They become agents through their continuous resistance and creation of alternatives for life. They demonstrate just what an end to the armed conflict and peace would mean for them. Finally, I share some reflections and voices from other social and popular sectors, people who also express their dreams for a peace with dignity in Colombia.

Terrorist Actors and Actions in the Service of Plunder

We still remember the quartering of Tupac Amaru in the 18th Century, a crime committed by Spanish armies to subdue rebellions against the Viceroy, who had been enslaving and butchering indigenous peoples in the pursuit of “natural riches.” The Spanish not only pulled apart the body of this indigenous leader; they presented his head on a stake so that all of Cuzco and its rebels would be subdued through terror. With this demonstration of “power,” the Spanish sought to guarantee the obedience and submission of their slaves.

Centuries later, transnational corporations like Chiquita, Dole, Del Monte and countless others have sought to do the same, to use terror to put an end to the unions representing banana workers. One Colombian death squad leader, Ever Veloze (better known by his alias, “HH”), confessed as much upon his extradition to the United States as a common criminal. Upon extradition, he and other right-wing paramilitary leaders began to come clean, detailing facts that exposed the true and final beneficiaries of the war in Colombia. But these men were extradited not for the crimes against humanity they carried out throughout the country but on charges of drug trafficking and conspiracy to commit crimes.

Colombia’s *Justice and Peace Law* unsubstantially claims to guarantee truth, justice, reparations and non-repetition to the millions of Colombian victims of crimes against humanity. In testimonials given by HH and others under this law, it became a publicized fact that the death squads acted with the support of the Colombian military, politicians and businesspeople. Upon arriving in a region, the paramilitaries would obtain previously arranged authorization and agreements with local authorities as well as economic support. The objectives of these death squads were, at least, twofold: to exterminate the armed insurgency and, more importantly, to free up territories (i.e. investment assets) for economic elites.

Owing to lengthy strikes carried out by the unions, the transnational banana companies considered themselves to be in dire economic straights. Something had to be done to move the economy forward, to raise profit margins. That something was to active and support death squads in exterminating the unions and their members.⁴ The success of paramilitary demobilization under the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) was such that the “paramilitaries” as they were known were deemed by the state to no longer exist in the country. However, while they have been officially “demobilized,” Colombia’s paramilitaries continue to commit crimes against humanity, now under the guise of “Criminal Gangs” (referred to in Spanish as the “Bacrim”). But they are the same people. These nominally illegal groups, backed by the government and acting in coordination with the Colombian Army, have committed more than 3,500 massacres throughout the country, leaving an unknowable number of orphans, widows and widowers, displaced, and walking dead. Their victims may possibly forgive but will never forget such humiliation committed against them and against life.

We won’t forget the massacres at El Salado, in Bolívar, or El Naya, in Cauca, where it is said that one hundred were murdered (a specific number has not been determined). Their victims were either decapitated, raped, dismembered, or a combination of each or all of these horrors.

⁴ See documentary *Impunity* (2010) by Lozanos and Morris.

As these territories are now being converted into investment assets for the agribusiness and extractive industries, are we expected to forget the hatred and terror of the massacres, the horrendous cases of cruel torture, the selective disappearances and murders carried out in these places?

Historically, government forces and paramilitaries have sown the seeds of terror in Colombia, and their methods are infamous. Witnesses tell us, when it became politically inconvenient for them to leave so much death out in the open, the paramilitaries used crematory ovens to dispose of corpses. According to HH, government forces encouraged these methods so as to prevent a statistical rise in levels of violence recorded in regions under their control. In most parts of the country, a majority of Colombians have suffered firsthand the devastation of paramilitary actions. This is even more acute in regions of geo-strategic interest to transnational corporations. In fact, where there is an abundance of gold, oil and gas, lithium, coal, water or other common goods, there are paramilitaries and concomitantly high numbers of displacement and death. The correlation is a proven fact. In some regions, such as in Cauca, the war is all encompassing. Yet it is in spite of this that those of us who are of these places stubbornly confront this reality with our alternative projects, our Life Plans in defense of the territory.

I remember the 1991 massacre at El Nilo, in the indigenous reserve of Huellas-Caloto, Cauca. Paramilitaries used bullets, machetes and axes to murder 20 Nasa who were living there and claiming their rights to the land. I can't forget the extensive and bloody campaigns of "social cleansing" carried out everyday in towns and villages throughout the region. Particularly vivid to me were those carried out in Santander de Quilichao, Cauca, between the years 2001-2003 and 2008-2011. Lists of names were painted in the streets and in the cemeteries: men and women to be assassinated. Hundreds have been murdered and disappeared. I remember my neighbors and friends looking for their relatives, many of them risking their own lives to go directly and ask paramilitary commanders where their children were. Dead or alive, they needed to know.

In those days, a friend once told me that her mother had gone with her neighbour to Lomitas, a neighbourhood in Santander de Quilichao, to ask about her son. The commander sat down with them and explained that he had no idea who her son was, but that if they had executed him, it would have been for a reason. It could have been anything from being involved with the guerrilla to being a thief or a drug addict, or something to that effect. He then suggested they look for her son at a specific location. Upon arriving, they found an enormous hole in the ground crossed by a long rope. It was the paramilitaries' dumping ground, an active mass grave. These two women witnessed the darkest of scenes, and even today they've not found the missing teen.

I also can't forget the fear felt by friends coming down from the mountains to do something as simple as buying groceries in town; some would never return home. On the way back up into the mountains, it is common for the paramilitaries to accuse people of being FARC supporters, saying that the food they were carrying was for the guerrilla. Several hundreds have lost their lives after having been accused of such things. This is the paradox of the war in Colombia: if you happen to make it home safe and sound, by virtue of having done so, you may be accused of being an army or paramilitary informant, which would result in you being "brought to justice" by the FARC in the mountains. If one side doesn't get you, the other side

may believe they have reason to. And it goes on and on, with people constantly finding themselves entangled in a web of terror.

As I turn to a discussion of the FARC, it important to note that we Nasa understand and share a belief in the historical necessity to form peoples' armies in defense of the poor and destitute. This has been one of the many ways we have resisted the theft of our territory by large landowners; it is also how we have historically evaded the abuses of landlords. A leader from the Tacueyó reserve in Toribío, Cauca, recalls:

When we began recuperating land in Cauca, we didn't do this alone, as indigenous communities. We were united with the campesinos and other impoverished sectors. Even the armed actors would help us along the way. That was in the 1960s and 1970s.

The *compañero* speaks with nostalgia because, for several decades now, the FARC have ceased to be an army of the people. While they declare themselves as such, with what we have seen, lived, and suffered in our territory, we can confirm that they do not represent us. To the contrary: the force exerted through their weapons aggravates the same pervasive violence that displaces us, seeks to silence our voices and challenges our convictions.

As indigenous peoples, our forms of resistance have not been static throughout the centuries. Decades ago, the armed actors of the left supported us. At that time, we even saw the emergence of armed factions of our movement, such as the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (MAQL). Now, however, neither ethically nor strategically do we see armed struggle as relevant. In fact, for us, it is a glaring contradiction. If we claim to defend all life, it would be an indefensible position to kill even our worst enemies. Furthermore, the political proposal put forth by the FARC in the name of Colombians has undergone a terrible deterioration in recent decades, and we cannot subscribe to it.

Obviously, we understand the vile blow suffered by their structures and political figures - with nearly 4,000 members of the Patriotic Union (UP) murdered in the 1980s. That political entity sought significant and substantive changes in Colombia through participation in a civil political process. They were butchered. We know that this experience has had negative consequences for the FARC. But what we do not understand is how, in our territories, it would correspond with political aims "of the left" to cause us the same pain and dispossession that we suffer at the hands of the economic Death Project and its agents "of the right."

In Colombia, and in northern Cauca in particular, the FARC have not only killed our leaders but they have also tried to infiltrate our organizations to submit us to their control. Like the other armed actors, the FARC also thrive on drug trafficking; they threaten, murder and intimidate indigenous civilians and our traditional authorities. I'm not going to create a list of our dead at the hands of members of the FARC, but I do want to note two murders committed in Cauca, events that have impacted me personally and that also demonstrate how similarly the armed actors, left or right, have behaved in our territories.

Towards the end of the 1980s, I went with my family to live in Santander de Quilichao. We were forced to leave the reserve in Jambaló because my mother, in one of her dreams,

discovered who had murdered the entire family of one of her friends. We arrived in Belén, a recently established community on the outskirts of town, to live in a mud hut my grandfather had built. In that neighborhood, we met as many people who looked at us with scorn for being indigenous as others who extended us their hands in friendship, because they had also left their lands during the violence of the 1950s and 1960s and ended up there just like us. In Belén, we grew up with other children with whom we shared the common experience of poverty.

I remember a friend of my brother's, a young fellow we affectionately nicknamed *Care Luna* ("Moon Face"). He was the most well behaved kid on the block – he liked to study and help others, and he was always with his mother when she went out and about. We would die of laughter witnessing how he was so spoiled and fearful of everything. Care Luna was friendly with all the neighbors, very respectful and everyone's friend. He hung out only with the people he knew and never had any major problems, except when he could occasionally be seen running from one end of the block to the other with his pants falling down, after his mother had whipped off his belt to punish him for having loaned someone the family's motorcycle, or for leaving it unattended while drinking beers with his friends. When Care Luna finished high school, he started going out with his friends to dance with girls, taking advantage of the motorcycle his mother had bought for him to use as a moto-taxi, one of the most widespread forms of informal work in Santander de Quilichao, second only to the resale of cell phone minutes.

In the middle of 2009, Care Luna got it in his head to go with a friend to a festival in El Tierrero, a hamlet in the Huellas-Caloto reserve. He didn't come home. His mother, desperate with grief, decided to talk to one of the FARC commanders operating in the area, as she had heard that FARC militants had taken her son. They say that she went with her eldest son and actually was able to speak with the guerrilla at their camp. There she was shown a video in which her son and others were being interrogated. Care Luna had his hands tied behind his back saying that he was not an informant, that he just drove his moto-taxi, that he lived in Belén, and that they please not kill him. Three days later, my neighbour was able to bury her youngest son.

I will never forget the great sadness felt by my little brother, Cristian, at that time: "He didn't deserve to die... why would they do that to a kid like him? If they should kill anyone, it should be me. I'm the useless one always causing them trouble." Cristian told me this over and over again. As I spoke with him on the phone, I never would have imagined that, one year later, the infamous "Criminal Gangs" would also take his life on a Belén street corner. Years earlier, you see, after coming to Belén, my brother had fallen into the dark world of drugs, a world that embraces those without opportunities or much else to do, a world he never managed to leave. Now, after a painful year of mourning, I feel that Cristian was finally freed from that world and now accompanies and protects us.

Near the same place where my brother was murdered, FARC militants tortured and killed a young indigenous woman accused of collaborating with the army. The *Tejido de Comunicación*, the well known communications team of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN), reports:

Zuleima Coicué, indigenous Nasa from El Damián, in the

Tacueyó reserve of northern Cauca, was a 21 year-old single mother. She studied up to the 5th grade of elementary school. She worked with her father, doing everything necessary to be able to provide for her 4 year-old son, Juan David. Her close friends remember her as a happy girl and a hard worker who rarely left the house. But on Saturday, July 10, 2010, during the celebrations in El Tierrero, she was excited to head to the dance. She had asked her cousin to go with her, but neither he nor her father wanted her to go. It wasn't because they were afraid of something happening to her but because they, too, were not used to leaving the house. Instead of going to the dance, they went to the fair, located near the highway that runs through Santander de Quilichao. The festivities lasted until the early hours of the morning.

At around 4:00 a.m., her cousin said they should head home. Zuleima suggested they wait until the day became a little clearer to travel, so her cousin sat by the highway waiting for her. He would never see her again. Initially, before the lengthy delay, he figured she may have met with a friend and decided to leave alone. It wasn't until noon that they realized she had not only failed to come home, but that her body had been found in Caloto, with evidence of rape and torture.⁵

For fear of meeting a similar fate, few spoke of what they saw. From what we know from those who did, it seems that Zuleima had been dragged from the party by several men and taken approximately a kilometre away from the festivities. There, in a field, she was raped multiple times and finished off with bullets. Her body was left at the side of the highway. Some say she was missing a breast. The horror is unspeakable. What we know for certain is that she was "brought to justice" by FARC militants, who like the other armed actors, believe they are the owners of life and, therefore, take it whenever and in whatever way they wish.

In recent years, the road leading from El Palo to the reserves of Toribío and El Tierrero has become one of the bloodiest in northern Cauca. Every week, one encounters an endless number of corpses, some of which the communities manage to recognize and bury, others determined unidentifiable and sent to a morgue in Caloto, Corinto, or Santander de Quilichao.

⁵ Tejido de Comunicación ACIN (2010), Exhumar la memoria. See: <http://www.nasaacin.org/editoriales-y-boletin-tejido-de-comunicacion/96-editorial-del-boletin-informativo-semanal/783-tejido-de-comunicacion-acin>

The war benefits the extraction of common goods

It's not just the singular attacks against civilians that are the cause of so much anguish in Cauca; there are also the continuous clashes among the armed groups themselves. The result of these battles is the displacement of people from the land. As Colombian economist and writer Héctor Mondragón has said, "in Colombia, it is not that there is displacement *because* there is war; rather, there is war *so that there can be* displacement". This is made clearer every day in our territories. All violent actions in Cauca, including those of the self-described "People's Army" [the FARC], serve to benefit only the friends of greed.

For example, the FARC's attack on Toribío on July 9, 2011, was a demented move, not only because of the lives lost and families psychologically and economically affected but also because of the group's insistence in brutally attacking the heart of peaceful resistance in Colombia. While the FARC claim the opposite, the attack was clearly against the people, the civilians, the indigenous, the dignity and the resistance being woven from northern Cauca. A man from Toribío:

It always surprises us when they say that their attacks are against the Public Forces. Those are our houses being destroyed! In the latest attack in Jambaló, the majority of the people had to move to a zone of permanent assembly (schools demarcated with white flags) to let them fight it out, so as not to be in the crossfire.

Every violent act committed by the armed insurgency against the people not only causes more fighting but also serves as a pretext for the regime to relegate our lands to theatres of war. The ACIN, in its recent document from the Public Hearing held after the attack on Toribío, affirms:

[...] both sides share the same strategy: fire weapons, set off explosives, bombard indiscriminately. And with that, they also share the same supposed certainty that dead and wounded civilians ought to have been legitimate targets if they happen to have been killed or wounded by whatever we fire from our lines"⁶.

It is clear that no armed actor protects us; they all use us as cannon fodder, while simultaneously assuring us that they do so in our defense. However, the worst of all is not that civilians pay the price of war but that there are those who are benefitting from it. The consequence of the attack on Toribío was the accelerated installation of the High Mountain Battalion of the Colombian Army in Tacueyó, the presence of thousands of soldiers. This particular Battalion will surely become notorious, as most are in the rest of the country, for the constant sexual violations committed against women, the theft of food and animals from

⁶ ACIN (2011). Pronunciamento de la Audiencia Pública de Toribío. See: <http://www.nasaacin.org/component/content/article/1-ultimas-noticias/2389-terminar-la-guerra-defender-la-autonomia-reconstruir-los-bienes-civiles-y-construir-la-paz>

the communities, and the intimidation and abuse of authority exercised with their guns. Just like all the other armed actors, attests Walter Noscué, governor of the Toribío reserve, “[the government troops] use our houses as trenches, because our houses tend to provide as much protection to the army as they do to the guerrilla.”

What we saw coming into focus in northern Cauca after the Public Hearing in Toribío was an even greater popular demand for the withdrawal of government and FARC bases from our territories. However, the day after this collective encounter, in which we affirmed our position of autonomy from all the armed actors, the selective murders and threats began anew. Since then, the FARC have not stopped murdering indigenous men who have been in the military, even after ending their active service. They also continue murdering sex trade workers, every one of them accused of being an informant⁷.

A friend with whom I have worked closely in the communities told me that when she went to a community to show a documentary, she and her companions found themselves near a party organized by members of the FARC. With guns on their shoulders and a microphone the men announced, “these Indians say we have to leave. We’ll see who has to leave first”. In another community, I was told, “the FARC have said that they won’t be held responsible for what happens to those who travel after 7:00 p.m.” During those same days, we received a threat directed at the ACIN’s central office in which we were told to vacate all offices of the organization within 24 hours⁸. We continue to receive threats from the *Águilas Negras* and *Los Ratrojos*, remnants of the 30,000 paramilitaries “demobilized” by the Uribe government. This is but a small sample of what the communities in northern Cauca are forced to live through. Who knows what else occurs in silence, what remains in the mountains for fear of reprisals and even further pain and death? The ACIN expressed well a few months ago the point I am making here:

[...] as time goes on, we have less doubt that the function of the war is in the interest of the mining-energy model of colonization, the expansion of biofuels and the expropriation of the territories of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and campesinos, and is driven by transnational companies. The invasion and occupation of our territories by both the official Army and the armed insurgency promote an economic model dependent upon the extraction of rents from what are common goods, reproducing a system of dispossession and annihilation that we as indigenous peoples have known for centuries.⁹

⁷ Tejido de Comunicación ACIN (2011). Asesinatos selectivos, pan de cada día en el norte del Cauca. See: <http://www.nasaacin.org/component/content/article/1-ultimas-noticias/2441-asesinatos-selectivos-pan-de-cada-dia-en-el-norte-del-cauca>

⁸ ACIN (2011). Cauca: Los guerreros le dan 24 horas a la ACIN para que abandonen las instalaciones de trabajo. See: <http://www.nasaacin.org/component/content/article/1-ultimas-noticias/2429-cauca-los-guerreros-le-dan-24-horas-a-la-acin-para-que-abandonen-las-instalaciones-de-trabajo>

⁹ Pronunciamento de la Audiencia Pública en Toribío. Cited.

A Nasa man stated clearly in Toribío: “With the entrance of the new Battalion to the territory, the goal is simply to control the drug trade”. The compañero sees the massive influx of military forces to northern Cauca with a somewhat cynical view; surely this is because he, like many of us, has also seen the soldiers and police negotiate with drug traffickers, in some cases protecting key routes for the cultivation and processing of cocaine, marijuana and opium. Territorial control is also needed to combat the resistance and alternative Life Plans of the indigenous movement, to destroy these processes and make way for transnational companies.

War belongs to them, peace belongs to us

Mr. President: the war will never end through more war; that fact has already been sufficiently demonstrated in the last 50 years of armed confrontation in Colombia. Mr. Alfonso Cano [Commander of the FARC Secretariat]: a short while ago, your war for the people became a war against the people. Now is the time for dialogue, to find a political solution to this conflict that is exterminating us.¹⁰

The people of Toribío sent the forceful message above to the commanders of the two main armed groups present in our territories. Despite our resistance and alternatives, constructed through centuries, we have always been made invisible by their acts. This call was for dialogue, but not simply between the armed groups but with the whole of civil society, including those of us who have been most affected by this war. To those of us who live its consequences, the war is absurd. But it is also an incredibly useful war to those who benefit from the economic Death Project.

For many years, our communities have not just talked about the armed conflict. We have lived it. That's why we've been forced to resist, to think about ways to protect and defend our Life Plans. For this reason, our efforts have been focused on the strengthening of our traditional indigenous Councils, our community projects and *Tejidos de Vida*, the programs and collective actions we weave within our political organizational process. Our dream and collective commitment, through that process, is to consolidate a political proposal alongside those of all other popular causes, not only around claims specific to indigenous peoples but across sectors. That's also why nearly a decade ago we adopted the *Minga* as a national collective action, not only an ancestral and everyday practice occurring in our communities.¹¹ We practice the *Minga* as a task held in common, where we all contribute threads to strengthen the great weaving of life, as indigenous peoples, campesinos, Afro-descendants and popular sectors all pushing to construct a “country of peoples without owners.” The *Minga* has an agenda of national unity that respects the differences among our communities but without losing sight of some central issues that affect us all, such as the economic Death Project that should be confronted with Life Plans from and for the people. Terror and war must be overcome through harmony and equilibrium put into practice by and for every people.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tejido de Comunicación ACIN (2008). La coordinación de la Minga debe ser colectiva. See: <http://colombia.indymedia.org/news/2008/10/94422.php>

Legislation of dispossession must be replaced by laws that protect both human beings and Mother Earth. Agreements reached with the state must be realized without forms of blackmail and without regard for who is in government. Finally, we must construct a popular agenda from the communities.

These are the collective goals we continue to weave with everyone. But we are also interested in strengthening our internal processes: the struggle for the defense of life, for the cultures of our peoples; for justice and harmony in our communities; for control over the economic and environmental well being of our territories; and for communication among all of us for truth and life. Those are the fundamental nodes of our process, steps in a path along which we try to walk the word in spite of diverse internal difficulties and permanent contradictions that, like in all social and political processes, are ever-present challenges.

One of the greatest difficulties we face with respect to the armed conflict is that many of our indigenous compañer@s have been pushed into joining one armed group or another: in some cases they may share their ideological view; in other cases, the war itself has pushed them into taking up arms. Perhaps the most common reasons are forced recruitment and the need to escape domestic violence. We regularly deal with men and women who appear to have joined the FARC only to be able to exercise power with a gun, to exact revenge over those who have offended them, and to break the law more easily. We find that very few who have joined the FARC's ranks can maintain an intelligent political discussion, because the only force they know comes by way of their weapons. Many of our young people have left the organizational structures of our communities because they have been unable to find spaces to flourish. Others leave perhaps due to the same authoritarianism our organizations tend to reject.

“There are many young members of the FARC, but what can we do about that if their problems stem from the experience of their family?” asks a teacher from the Toribío reserve. With some anguish, she adds that, in recent years, more and more young indigenous people have swelled the ranks of the guerrilla. Carlos Banguero, mayor of Toribío, notes with concern that “in the first attacks against the town, the majority of the forces were from other parts of the country. Now, however, they are young people from here attacking their own people.” This is a very complicated situation for the families, the community, the organization and the indigenous movement.

That's why the base communities have been demanding that all the armed actors leave the territory. Simultaneously, however, we must, as one citizen of Tacueyó put it “check the power of some of our own leaders, our own structures, authorities and actions within the territory. The community assemblies seem to be losing their legitimacy. I think that's why these other groups are winning more support.” This comment was made in reference to the authoritarian decisions of some indigenous leaders who have broken from the processes of popular consultation with the base communities. This situation makes clear that, though not all leaders are guilty of making self-interested decisions and acting contrary to our community processes, it only takes the actions of one person to have a negative impact on their entire movement. Says an indigenous governor from López Adentro:

The leaders and authorities must go to the communities and accompany them. The indigenous Council must be oriented by and make decisions based on processes whereby the community

is constantly consulted. We must revive our own sense of dignity, solidarity, equality, fairness, and fraternity. This is an urgent task of ours: to recuperate confidence within our territory.

Thus it is our priority to return to the grassroots, to listen, reflect and make decisions collectively to strengthen our organizational political process. We have to do this. We are under attack not only from the economic Death Project, the armed actors, laws of dispossession and propaganda from the mass media but also from our own lack of coherence and ability to walk the word.

To be like Mama Kiwe with humility for life

It is commonly accepted that the indigenous movement in Colombia broke onto the national scene with the founding of the Regional Indigenous Councils of Cauca (CRIC) on February 24, 1971. The indigenous communities of northern Cauca have been subsequently characterized by their resistance, permanent struggle in defense of Mother Earth and Life, and the CRIC's call for "Territory, Culture and Autonomy." Since then, as I've already mentioned, we've been raising collective conscience throughout the territory to understand and defend our Life Plans from the Death Project of transnational capital. In that time, we have come to learn and recognize that, throughout history, the material aggressor was simply changing his mask: from the Spanish, to the landlords, to the United States, and now to the transnational corporations. What we have had to recreate and nourish was not only our struggles but also our lives in order to resist these aggressors.

The challenge that unites us to defend our territory is the same challenge faced by other social sectors in the country. We have learned that we can't do it alone, that we need each other in order to resist and survive in Colombia. So from the Minga of Social and Community Resistance, which we projected on a national level in 2008, we have proposed an agenda of the people. We initiated diverse collective actions to defend life, together and with all others who seek to do the same. Along that beautiful path, full of joy felt through the sharing of experiences with other peoples, we surely have encountered many thorns that seek to tear apart our weavings of life, enemies that seek to break through what we are creating. That destruction will succeed only if we're unable to strengthen our political proposals and move them beyond sectoral demands. It's clear that when these diverse processes begin to consolidate their weavings together, external aggression will be there to tear at the threads, and our internal contradictions will only allow them to loosen more readily.

We have begun to see this happening. When we were noticed and seen to have a concrete proposal with which we were working furiously, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rapidly parachuted in. These groups eagerly wanted to finance what we had underway. We now see that the error we committed was to allow these outsiders into our processes and to finance the projects that they wanted to finance, irrespective of our criteria and needs. Some of them, those who function well within the economic model, ended up deceiving some leaders. Certainly what I am saying here may be controversial to some; but if we don't see this now and recognize it as a weakness, it is quite possible that our entire organizational process

could be lost through cooptation. Still, I feel it is possible to understand the time we live in, or our current context, in general terms from the experience of northern Cauca. We just need to be willing to look in the mirror and to explore and confront that which makes us most uncomfortable.

In that spirit, and as a way of concluding this story, I would like to share some questions that permeate the thoughts of many of us in northern Cauca, especially as we are now beginning to speak of the possibility of dialogue between the armed actors and the government, and still more, in situations in which some of our own leaders have offered our territory as spaces for these dialogues.

What does it mean for the Nasa to live in peace?

We asked the above question to many elders, youth and children from the reserves in northern Cauca during working groups carried out in the lead up to the 2011 Public Hearing in Toribío. Most didn't even mention the possibility of offering up the territory as a venue for dialogue between the armed actors and the government. On the contrary, many reiterated their opposition to these practices and demanded that these groups leave. In spite of our experiences in trying to talk to the armed actors, many expressed that we should go to their encampments with the sole objective of getting back the young people they've taken from us. The members of our community recognized that we have great problems and contradictions that are tearing apart our organizations and that they must be confronted so as to strengthen and protect our structures and processes.

Nobody spoke of a peace project financed by NGOs but of the need to consolidate territorial autonomy through communitarian projects that nurture our Life Plans. Nobody spoke of negotiating with the government of [Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos] but of civil disobedience to resist the death laws his government has imposed. Nobody spoke in support or agreed with the idea of offering the territory as a zone to be cleared by the military but rather of a need to construct a broad-reaching analysis of problems within it, an analysis that would emanate from consultation with the affected communities.

So, as Nasa, when we talk about peace, what are we talking about? It's simple: to live in equilibrium and harmony with Mother Earth; to speak and carry out the word of the people in freedom; to travel within our community without fear of death; to study without having one's school suddenly turned into a military front line; to sow and harvest our food without fear of fumigations; to once again be able to drink the water from the streams and rivers; to see in vivid color the return of green to our mountains as they overcome the encroachment of monocrop deserts and pollution left behind from mines; to once again have the time and energy to sufficiently participate in our community assemblies; to make collective decisions without the immanent fear of one Death Project or another; to be brought together not for funeral processions but for celebrations dedicated to the miracle of life; to weave bonds of unity with other peoples and processes; to live, exercise and nourish our dreams and Life Plans. This was what overwhelmingly came forth in several working groups with our communities: dreams of what would happen not just without the armed conflict but also without the economic Death Project.

With this, the community members demanded:

That we reflect more widely in the community and with the authorities on the implications for declaring our territories autonomous zones of peace, [proposing] to declare indigenous lands in Northern Cauca "territories in resistance and disobedience," as much from the armed conflict as from the laws of the state.

They also resolved to "carrying out 'sweeps' of the community, informing people and creating spaces for reflection in the entire territory." Finally, the communities demanded "that both the government forces and the armed insurgency remove their evils from our territory"¹².

The strength in this proposal's decision and direction should come as no surprise to those who know our communities; it is a path we have been walking for a long time, especially since the Mingas of Resistance for Autonomy and Territorial Harmony aimed at demilitarizing indigenous territories and ending the war promoted by the Army and the FARC. The ACIN, with support from the CRIC, leads these 'sweeps' of the communities through the organization's Tejidos de Vida. The first of these, along with the installation of territorial controls, was established in El Tierrero. There, since August 23, 2011, indigenous guards accompanied by community members have been exercising community presence and control, working pedagogically with the objective of ensuring people understand why it is necessary. It is the intention of our organizations to carry out these kinds of Mingas across the territory, in all 324 townships of *Cxhab Wala Kive* (the "Great Territory of the Nasa" of Northern Cauca). Noted an elder in El Tierrero:

Now, yes, we're going to be able to visit our friends and relations, to gather remedies in the hinterlands and to see how people are doing, with many people. And happily! In the past, we've wanted to do this, but we couldn't. The reason was because there are bad people about, and one simply does not leave the house alone.

Now for a critical question: with an end to the armed conflict, will we see peace in our territories? Many of us, tired of seeing our people killed on a daily basis and unwilling to put up with the brutality of the war, believe this to be so, that it is enough to remove from the territory all the armed actors so that our lives might return to "normal." Others believe that an end to the armed conflict is an important and urgent step but no guarantee for peace, especially as long as the 'free trade' and extractivist model advances and prevails. Those who believe the latter are on to something. The problem, after all, is not really the armed actors; they are simply instruments used to terrorize and remove us from our territories.

This leads us to more critical questions. If the armed conflict stops, if all the actors are demobilized, what are all those men and women going to do, having become accustomed to war? If their formal organizational structure is dismantled and there are no opportunities for

¹² Tejido de Comunicación ACIN (2011). Pueblos Nasa: "Cuenten con nosotros para la Paz... Nunca para la Guerra". See: <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=132936>

them as civilians, what else can we expect them to do? Will there be even more ‘criminal gangs’? What happens if the laws continue in force, as they always have, and we still find ourselves in the process of being stripped of our territories and our basic rights? What happens if the transnational companies continue to promote extraction from our Mother Earth? What happens if our leaders and processes continue to be co-opted and ‘NGO-ized’? What happens if we no longer seek to recognize weaknesses and internal contradictions with the intention of strengthening our community processes? What if the politicians keep deceiving us and wanting us to serve them as they climb their way to political power? Is the end to the armed conflict enough for us to be able to live in our territories, to live in Colombia? These are of the dozens of questions we ask ourselves every day.

We have many reasons to distrust President Santos. Keep in mind that this is the same Santos who founded the notion of “false positives”¹³ in Colombia. This is the same man who promoted the most prejudicial and harmful laws adopted by the previous government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez. This Santos now speaks to us about “peace.” Still, it is difficult for us to imagine ourselves at that point. Would it be possible to just jump to that part of our history in this country? To think of the many deaths that might be avoided, the victims saved from a gruesome reality!

I must stop for a moment to look upon my words. It’s my use of the word “victims.” I can’t avoid it, so I should tell you that my definition of this term is broad. I dare not use the word “innocent,” not because I question the innocence of those who die in this war but because I don’t know at what point those who die in combat have lost their innocence and enter the realm of the “guilty.” Guilty of not having opportunities? Guilty of being landless? Guilty of being without access to education? Guilty of a life without dignity? Guilty of being forcibly recruited? Guilty of knowing only how to use a gun? Guilty of being poor? Guilty and thus responsible for the social decomposition that surrounds them? Guilty of the wealth of the powerful? Guilty of restricting use of the land to the cultivation of monocrops? Guilty of the destruction of Mother Earth?

I deeply feel that the only guilty parties in any of the above circumstances are the economic Death Project and its beneficiaries. They are those above us, working, legislating and sentencing us to the service of transnational corporate interests for accumulation and greed. The economic Death Project is the intellectual author of our destruction and dispossession. If we lose sight of the bigger picture and are to take just the war as our reference point, the end of the war would mean a life in peace. But if we consider our Life Plans and all that they mean in terms of protective mechanisms and promoters of alternatives, it is clear that an end to the armed conflict guaranteeing peace is right now but a collective yearning, a hope, and a gamble. If along this path we don’t also come together cohesively to mobilize for a transformative political agenda, our resistance will dissipate.

¹³ In Colombia, the “scandal of the false positives” refers to the murder of innocent civilians by the Colombian Army, who are then dressed as guerrilla fighters (“positives”) and played off as “terrorists” killed in action. As Minister of Defense under the Uribe government, Juan Manuel Santos established the conditions, norms for remuneration, and means for concealing these crimes.

What is the peace with dignity that Colombia needs?

Recently, Colombia's social and popular organizations held a dialogue and exchange in Barrancabermeja, Santander. Some 30,000 attended the National Encounter of Peasant, Afro-descendent, and Indigenous Communities for Land and Peace in Colombia [*Encuentro Nacional de Comunidades Campesinas, Afrodescendientes e Indígenas por la Tierra y la Paz de Colombia*]. In that space they reflected on issues affecting the country, including the intensification of the armed conflict. They also asked what kind of peace is needed:

This event was carried out for peace, but how is it that we understand that? Peace can mean an end to the armed conflict. But if this was to happen, and the conflict diminishes, is that peace? For peace to exist, we must also have autonomy; but this does not mean the autonomy to negotiate with the government the right to exploit economic resources, nor to negotiate with some armed group to lay down their arms. True peace is built from the bottom up. [...] For peace of mind to come about, the government must not hand over our national sovereignty. At the present time, we cannot even begin to speak of sovereignty, nor of agrarian reform, because the space for such discussions does not exist. There is much land in the hands of a few - and many hands without land to work.¹⁴

The depth of the discussion from participants at this event is an important contribution to finding the path towards the peace that we all seek. The Encuentro not only served to make visible the resistances and alternative processes in Colombia are currently promoting, but it also confirmed the assertion that the war is a mere instrument of dispossession. The participants said clearly to the armed actors that they “don't represent us,” that we're tired of their crimes and lies.

The political declaration that emerged from Barrancabermeja calls on us to transform the economic Death Project, to continue with and to further articulate our resistances and alternatives throughout the country towards the goal of realizing our own peace: a peace with dignity, not a peace that puts a price and conditions on our liberation. To illustrate, I share two key points of this declaration:

Democracy in our country and the improvement of conditions to make effective and to guarantee our rights demands a new model that makes possible the use of our resources and wealth, overcoming deep economic and social inequalities, for the *buen vivir* [“good life”] of our population.

¹⁴ Tejido de Comunicación ACIN (2011). El cese del conflicto no es la paz. See: <http://www.nasaacin.org/component/content/article/1-ultimas-noticias/2534-el-cese-del-conflicto-no-es-la-paz>

[...] We are aware that the perspective of a political solution [to the armed conflict] has many enemies, especially those who benefit from the current state of things and the privileged of society that [the war] sustains. Furthermore, to end the war also means to oppose the interests of those who have made it a lucrative business. As Colombians, we have the right to foster the construction of new conditions that would pave the way for a different reality than that of violence, one where conflicts are no longer socially inherent but may be dealt with through dialogue, social justice and genuine peace.¹⁵

Nourishing this dialogue among peoples and processes in Colombia, I place the previous statement alongside a call for peace from our compañero, Manuel Rozental:

No more war! Peace! But the people's peace! One without 'free trade,' laws of dispossession, and terror. A peace with truth, justice, and full reparations with states that fulfill their obligations no matter who is in government and, above all, with an agenda of the peoples that cannot be ignored, denied or hijacked for the "peace" of those from above. The peace of Mother Earth in freedom, of the woman unchained and unsilenced, of shame turned into a mirror that looks on us without mercy but with tenderness and gets us, finally, to our own Never Again!¹⁶

What, then, are the challenges to the current context, one in which we lack the same strength as when we mobilized with others in the streets with a concrete political proposal? The first must be to recognize that, from the outset, not only are the "powerful" taking control of common goods; they are also taking our own people: youth recruited by the armed actors from all sides of the conflict. Simultaneously, we must recognize that NGOs, governments, and even transnational corporations have had the ability to confuse our leaders to the extent that they fall into the perils of co-optation. A few go to one side, others to the other side. Still, there are those of us from diverse community spaces without the desire to be heroes, such as the Tejido de Comunicación, who keep thinking about what to do, how to act collectively so as to prevent our resistance from imploding, and how to continue with our Life Plans.

Our resistance is finite, and it is impossible to continue, teetering between sides, while our autonomy demands our freedom and emancipation. If we continue the way we have, our community process is going to break. I feel that, with the discordant movements of people from one side to the other, the threads we've managed to weave aren't going to hold. Thus it is urgent for us to return to paths on which we have already walked: the Indigenous and

¹⁵ Encuentro nacional de comunidades campesinas, afrodescendientes e indígenas por la tierra y la paz de Colombia (2011). Final declaration, Encounter of Peace Barrancabermeja. See: <http://ilsa.org.co:81/node/471>

¹⁶ Rozental, Manuel (2011). "Machismo, Tierras y Paz para el Libre Comercio". See: <http://colombia.indymedia.org/news/2008/10/94422.php>

Popular Congress; the Popular Consultation on Free Trade; the Liberation of Mother Earth, the Itinerant Congress of the Peoples; the Visit for the Country We Want; and the Minga of Social and Community Resistance. These paths are necessary for us to maintain our cohesion, to mobilize and to build anew many worlds of peoples without owners.

I feel the responsibility to scream from the deepest roots of my soul, as an indigenous Nasa woman, and as a daughter of the territory of my ancestors. I scream loudest at those who are mistaken, at those who put us between two *machismos*, both of which turn their backs on the Law of Origin of Mother Earth. One machismo shouts and performs actions of war, violence, brute force and recruits for their death our sons and daughters of harmony. The other machismo condemns us to kneel before the mandate of the powerful, using pragmatic reasoning and powered by authoritarian and selfish desires. Neither of them are our people. Both silence our grandmothers and grandfathers and do not listen to Mama Kiwe with humility. Screaming at these machismos from my right as a Nasa woman and our right as a free and autonomous people, I demand respect.

Silence! Listen to our voices, because the collective word is that which moves us. We are none of the machismos that seek to deny us life. This may be our last chance. I feel that to be silent at this moment would make me an accomplice of something unacceptable. I don't let these words out with resentment, nor are they intended to make people uncomfortable or uneasy. I am inspired by an obligation towards a sincere attempt and feeling to summon people to understand and obey the ancestral mandate to which I am ready to submit; to reopen spaces of dialogue and collective reflection before the memory of our elders; so that *we* can build the peace *we* need to build and not that of our oppressors, whose interest is death.

September, 2011