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# Desplazado: “Now I Am Here as an Outcast”

*Anonymous*

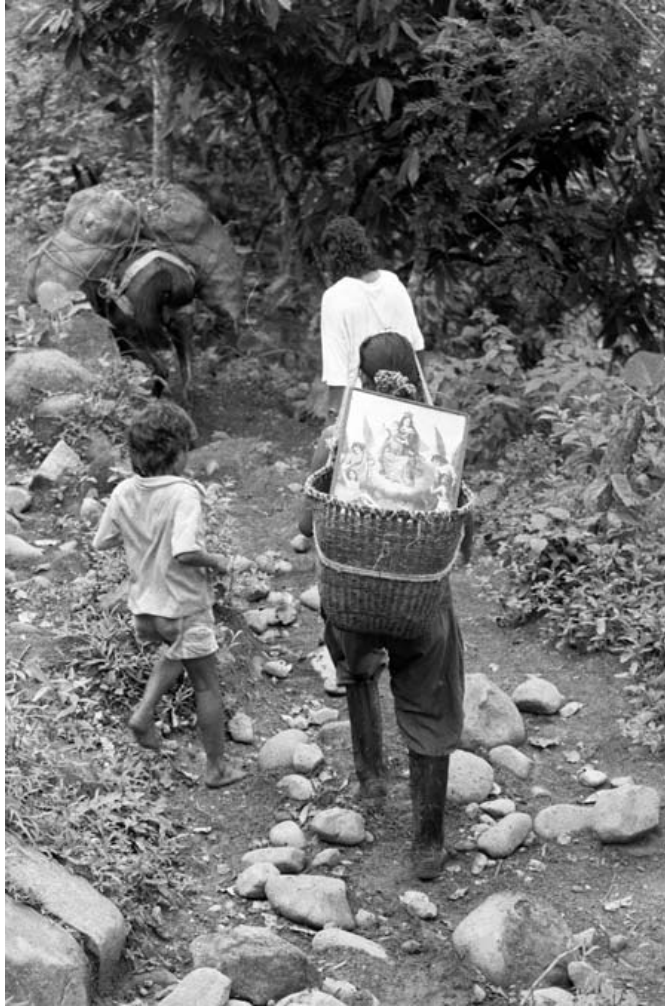
*Estimates of how many individuals are displaced within Colombia's borders vary significantly according to source, but in 2015 something close to 5.3 million people were forced to flee their homes, putting the country at the top of a world list of countries suffering internal displacement. As high as such estimates are, they likely undercount the problem, as they fail to record multiple displacements, in which individuals or families (a majority of the displaced are women and children) are pushed by fear first from rural areas to towns and subsequently from towns to cities. Also, recent figures only consider at most those displaced during the last two decades, not accounting for the approximately 2 million Colombians who fled their homes between 1946 and 1966 during La Violencia.*

As a displaced person I had to leave behind all of my things. I owned six hectares with cacao, animals, horses, pigs, chickens, and I lost everything. I used to go down to the wholesaler to sell my cacao. My son and I made a living that way. I sold my corn and timber other places.

Another son of mine had his cows taken away because supposedly they were stolen cattle. I had some cattle years before, which I purchased with credit from the Caja Agraria [Colombia's Farm Credit Bank]. It was a good time for the National Federation of Cacao Growers. But when business went down I had to sell the cattle to pay my debts to the bank.

Later, another son dropped out of school and told me that he wanted to work in the farm. We became partners, but he had to leave because of the fighting. Right now he's outside the department. I found out that he was sick, but I haven't had the resources to go visit him.

There's nothing here right now. In order to go out to the fields to harvest you need to ask the paramilitaries or the army for permission. When I came back four months ago they had taken all the animals, along with my son's 9 steers and about 70 head of cattle belonging to my wife—this was after the bombing in February [1997], and I had left behind 27 pigs, as well as 3 horses belonging to me and 3 belonging to my son.



Jesús Abad Colorado, *On the Path from La Unión to San José de Apartadó*. This photograph of a displaced family leaving their home was taken in Antioquia, northwestern Colombia, one of the country's most violent regions during the 1990s. In Carlos Alberto Giraldo, Jesús Abad Colorado, and Diego Pérez, *Relatos e imágenes: El desplazamiento en Colombia* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1997), 10. Courtesy of the photographer.

Also, I lost several hectares of fruit trees, and 23 sacks of corn that I had harvested were gone.

I had gone down to the municipality of Turbo to sell some cacao when, after my return, I found out about the bombing near Salaquí. My family was there. As soon as I could—eight days after the bombings happened—I went back to see what had been left of my family. My happiness was to find all of them safe.

The situation became more serious when the armed men sent word that everybody had to get out. On the one hand, the guerrillas picked many people up and took them away. On the other, paramilitaries sentenced all the campesinos who had collaborated [with the guerrillas] to death. Because of all the fear, people arrived to Riosucio as displaced.

I was able to go back to my land for a few days to harvest my crops. However, when the community of Salaquisito began to be displaced toward

the town, I thought that staying alone would have meant I was writing my death sentence, and I also left.

My farm borders to the north with that of Mr. Arnaldo Gómez, a good man who was killed by the guerrillas. He owned between seventy and eighty-five hectares. My sons and I owned four houses, in addition to one being built by the young man who was disappeared before the bombings.

My family was very happy when I returned after the bombardments. They told me the story of what had happened: the guerrillas killed Mr. Arnaldo, took over his farm, and expropriated his belongings. Because the guerrillas were present and dominated the areas surrounding the river, the military decided to attack them with an air strike. Some of those displaced in Pavarandó and Turbo say that they were displaced because of abuses from the military, but that is not entirely true. The army did not come in committing abuses toward everyone. They came down hard on those who were guerrilla members or had connections to those people.

The truth is that the guerrillas were the ones who made the decision to pick many people up from several *veredas* [rural districts] near the Salaquí and Truandó Rivers, to get them to leave the department of Chocó. For instance, on the day we were displaced, there was a guerrilla commission that came to take over the community of Salaquisito, but fortunately we had already left for Riosucio.

For some time there were many people living in the encampment built by the guerrillas in don Arnaldo's farm: up to 600 and 700 guerrillas. Many had come here to take refuge, between January and February of 1996, after having been pursued by the army and the paramilitaries in other parts of Urabá. The guerrillas never abandoned that farm. They took turns holding camp there for several days. That is why in the towns around the Salaquí River the only law that was worth anything was theirs. In fact, when people had problems, they would go to the encampment so that the guerrillas would tell them what had to be done.

Almost all of us 285 inhabitants of Salaquisito are now displaced. I say this exact figure because I was the legal representative before the government for the community during the process of collective land titling under Law 70 of 1993, which protects the culture and territory of the Afro-Colombian population. Almost all of our people are in Riosucio, displaced, and have had to bear very strong hardships. There is no one left in the plots of land or the hamlets.

As campesinos, we have carried out agriculture to subsist and provide subsistence to others that have never struck the ground themselves—guerrillas, paramilitaries, and even many landowners. We produce for ourselves, for the

municipality, for the department, and for the country. Products from here—particularly plantain—are sent to Cartagena and Barranquilla through the Atrato River and then through the Gulf of Urabá. That is, we work for our subsistence and that of many others who will never know what it's like to cultivate the land amid this violence and defenselessness. That will never know that we have had everything taken from us here without anyone ever finding out, or ever saying or doing something on our behalf.

We are currently in Riosucio as outcasts. We campesinos have a very strong sense of morality and pride: we do not like to steal or beg from anyone. That dignity means working for our food and sharing with other neighbors, providing them with a meal. If there is nothing to eat, we kill a chicken to give lunch to a friend. Rice is harvested, as is plantain, yucca. Nothing is lacking or left over.

This tragedy is making us come apart, and with this our culture of solidarity is destroyed; we are losing it. We lost possessions and goods. It seems incredible that with everything we have in this country we are in a state of misery, waiting every fifteen days or every month for foodstuffs from the government. . . .

I have not been back to the countryside since January (1997). It is very sad not to have the right to go to the place where I always was, where I lived with others, where I shed the sweat of my existence. I lived in that farm since I was seventeen until I was fifty-four years old. I raised eight sons, I put them through school with what the land gave me. When I had a toothache, I would be taken care of at my farm. Now I am here, as an outcast, waiting for foodstuffs or for a meal, without anything to do, without being able to go to the farm. Aside from all this—of feeling hungry and abandoned—there is an overbearing anger created by the humiliation one feels as an honest campesino, as a good person. I cannot find a name for that kind of humiliation.

*Translated by Ana María Gómez López*