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What's killing them: Violence beyond COVID-19 in Colombia

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'I heard what happened. Are you all right?' I texted an acquaintance of mine the morning of the 27th of April, almost a month after the Colombian government announced the beginning of the national quarantine on March 24th. 'We could hear shooting. There was an explosion. People say *they* threw a grenade. We are staying at home'. On the evening of the 26th of April three men were killed in the rural Afro-Colombian community of Munchique, in the municipality of Buenos Aires in the mountains of the north of the department of Cauca. Armando Montaña, Weimar Arará and Humberto Solís were hanging out in the park with other people when unidentified men attacked the group. This gathering was against strict government lockdown regulations, according to which people were required to stay at home and were only allowed out under very few exceptions. This gathering was also against a curfew imposed by dissidents of the demobilised FARC guerrilla organisation. The attack, people assumed, was committed by this armed group. In the weeks before the attack people had received Whatsapp messages and printed pamphlets that, under the name of this armed group, warned people to follow government orders of lockdown or otherwise become a target. Such pamphlets are nothing new; during 2019, for instance, 114 circulated with threats to social leaders (Verdad Abierta, 2020).

I first visited Buenos Aires in January 2016. I was starting fieldwork in San Miguel, a small rural Afro-Colombian community that in the early 2000s endured a paramilitary occupation that lasted over four years. My research was not about the experience of confinement but about war-related reproductive violence. However, it was the militarisation of the everyday life of people at the hands (and weapons) of paramilitaries and the imposition of a social order through various repertoires of violence, that not only encouraged sexual violence but obscured reproductive violence (in the case of my research, children born of sexual violence and forced motherhood). The confinement, which began in 2000 and lasted until the paramilitary demobilisation in December 2004, imposed a series of regulations upon the community: a curfew, restrictions on mobility both inside the rural community and to the outside, prohibitions on gatherings, restricted access to food and

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medicines, and requirements such as the demand that people sleep with the doors of their houses open so that paramilitaries could always have access to everything and everyone. For many people in the mountains of the north of Cauca, and in other rural war-affected communities across the country, a lockdown was nothing new.

It was the 16th of March, 2020. I was hiding from the hot midday sun while waiting for the local bus that would take me to San Miguel, where I was meeting a group of young women with whom I was starting a photo-voice project. 'What's the point of that? I wonder', said a woman who was sharing the shade with me while pointing at the group of kids and teenagers who, disregarding any sense of social distance that until that point was only a suggestion, were playing in the street. The woman, who I later found out was a school teacher, was talking about the order that the national government had issued that morning: in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all educational institutions across the country were to move their classes online and students were asked to stay home. 'They ask us to move classes online, but who has computers or internet at home? They ask us to stay at home, but who can bear the heat? They ask us to keep washing our hands, but we can never rely on having tap water. They also ask people to avoid going to hospitals, at least that's one measure we know how to follow!'. Buenos Aires has an area of around 520 km², where most of the people live in rural communities across valleys and mountains. Access roads are not in very good shape and transportation is scarce. There is only one hospital and one health centre for the entire municipality.

I had arrived to do fieldwork a couple of days after the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Bogota on the 6th of March. There were no cases in Buenos Aires. Things were still confusing and no-one knew how fast it was going to spread. With the constant doubt of whether it was a good idea to be doing fieldwork under those circumstances, it seemed that people in the mountains where I was felt that that the pandemic was something distant. Something that happened in the cities where people had access to running water, hospitals, or—as we could see in the news of other countries—balconies to sing and clap from. 'It's so hard to imagine having to be locked at home, like those people in other countries that we see in the news', said the woman who owns the only restaurant where you can find dinner after 6 pm in the small town where I was staying, a restaurant which she runs in her living room. While she was bringing fresh guava juice to my table companion, a man from a different region who was working in one of the gold mines, she continued: 'last year, during the ELN [National Liberation Army] armed strike we had to stay locked for 2 weeks. But that's a complete different story!'

Since colonial times when slaves were brought to this region to extract gold, Cauca has suffered the intertwined forms of colonial, racial, state, economic, and ecological violence. The geo-political location of this region has attracted armed groups that since the early 80s have sought to assume control over the strategic paths for drugs trafficking and the production chains of both coca and cannabis, and have been key actors in the development of illegal and legal gold mining (Muñoz, 2010). The presence of various guerrilla organisations in the 80s and 90s was contested with the arrival of paramilitaries in the late 90s until their demobilisation between 2004 and 2005. After this, various guerrilla organisations and neo-paramilitaries structures continued their disputes over access and control of strategic paths and extractive economies. Despite people's hopes that with the 2016 peace negotiation between the Colombian government and FARC, Latin America's oldest guerrilla organisation, the armed violence was going to cease, this has not been

the case in Cauca (as well as in many other rural regions in Colombia). Currently, confrontations involve various paramilitary organisations, FARC dissidents, ELN, and around 7800 people from the army that, as Truth Commissioner Alejandra Miller stated in a recent panel addressing the ongoing war in Cauca, keep using a counter insurgency strategy that time after time has proven to mostly be effective at increasing violence (mass displacement, massacres, selective killings, sexual violence) (CEV, 2020).

The Colombian Truth Commission (CEV), which is part of the implementation of the 2016 peace accords, noted Commissioner Miller, has collected testimonies that show the active alliances between the military, new paramilitary organisations, and the Mexican cartels in their shared interest to have control over strategic drug trafficking passages (CEV, 2020). Cristian Delgado, a peasant leader and spokesman of the Territorial Committee to Guarantee the Defence of Human Rights in Cauca (Mesa Territorial de Garantías de la Defensa de los DDHH en Cauca) who participated in the same panel, referred to 11 testimonies that describe alliances between the army and other armed groups that have resulted in the targeting and assassination of social leaders and former FARC combatants who did not join the dissidents (CEV, 2020). These kind of partnerships, of course, are nothing new. I remember a story a man from San Miguel shared with me in 2016. During the years of the paramilitary confinement, he once had to go to the small city of Santander de Quilichao. Once there, he ran into a cop and asked him what one should do if there were paramilitaries in his community. 'Treat them nicely', the cop replied.

For Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Cauca, the signing of the comprehensive 2016 Peace agreements represented a historic opportunity not only to see the end of armed confrontations between the army and FARC, but also to address some of the structural causes of the conflict (such as land distribution). However, the very active commitment of the current government to weaken the implementation of the peace accords, together with the strengthening of armed groups and a war rhetoric that keeps stigmatising resistance processes and social leaders, has resulted in increased violence (Indepaz, 2020a). According to Indepaz (2020a), the Institute of Studies of Peace and Development, in 2020 alone there have been more than 120 killings of social leaders and 25 former FARC combatants in the country. Since the signing of the Peace agreement in 2016, 215 social leaders have been killed in Cauca and 36 former FARC combatants.

For social leaders and their families, the COVID-19 lockdown increases the already high risk of being targeted and killed (Zulver and Janetsky, 2020). Restrictions and control over people's mobility makes them more trackable and so more vulnerable to attacks, many of which have happened in their houses or while assisting their communities to cope with the quarantine (Estupiñan, 2020). Their risk increases as the already-limited protection social leaders receive from the government or international organisations has almost disappeared during the lockdown (Zulver, 2020). While there are more reported assassinations of men in those roles, women social leaders, Julia Zulver (2020) notes, are not only killed but targeted in gendered ways through sexual violence and threats to their families. During the lockdown, these women have seen (as have women around the world) how their care labour has increased at home. In addition, Zulver continues, women social leaders, continuing to risk their lives, have assumed the added responsibility of taking care of their communities which, after decades of colonial, state, and armed violence, continue to endure economic hardship.

In the north of Cauca the lockdown has exposed (once again) and exacerbated the already outrageous inequalities imposed through intertwined forms of violence. Resistance and solidarity, as it has been the case during decades of war, remains strong during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schoolteachers are juggling to reach their students. From their own pocket, some teachers print home-made handouts to deliver them door by door in rural areas. Women and men from the Indigenous Guard and the Cimarrona Guard, nonviolent unarmed Indigenous and Afro-Colombian collectives whose purpose is to protect their territories, ancestral cultures, and communities from all forms of violence, have organised disinfection brigades and worked together and with other organisations to deliver groceries, medicines, and other supplies like facemasks (Carranza Muñoz, 2020; Valencia Medina, 2020). According to the monitoring tool created by University of Los Andes (2020) to follow the spread of the virus in Colombia, to the 28th of June there are two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Buenos Aires and 331 in the whole of Cauca, 14 people deceased. The quarantine continues in Colombia and it does not seem to be close to an end. The COVID-19 pandemic is of course to be taken seriously. Attention to the pandemic, however, cannot distract us from the historic and current violence that continues to threaten, terrorise and kill people in this part of the country, especially Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples. Since the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Colombia on the 6th of March, 28 social leaders, defenders of their communities, have been killed in Cauca. These are their names (Indepaz, 2020b):

1. Jorge Macana, peasant leader. Killed on the 7th March.
2. Darwin Andrey Vitonco Jembuel, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 7th March.
3. Luz Eneida Ipia Chocue, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 8th March.
4. Alexis Vergara, union leader. Killed on the 10th March.
5. Laureano Alberto Tróchez Menza, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 15th March.
6. Yilber Andrés Yatacué Méndez, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 15th March.
7. Luis Alberto Yule, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 16th March.
8. Marly Fernanda Quina Campo, Indigenous leader. Killed on 27th March.
9. Hamilton Gasca Ortega, peasant leader. Killed with his three children on the 4th April.
10. Policarpo Guzman Mage, peasant leader. Killed on the 11th April.
11. Teodomiro Sotelo Anacona, Afro-Colombian leader. Killed on the 17th April.
12. Andres Cansimance Burbano, Afro-Colombian leader. Killed on the 18th April.
13. Mario Chilhueso Cruz, peasant leader. Killed on the 19th April.
14. Gildardo Achicué, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 19th April.
15. Jesús Albeiro Riascos, Afro-Colombian leader. Killed on the 22nd April.
16. Andrés Sabino Angulo, Afro-Colombian leader. Killed on the 22nd April.
17. Hugo de Jesús Giraldo López, peasant leader. Killed on the 22nd April.
18. Floro Samboní, peasant leader. Killed on the 24th April.
19. Alvaro Narvaez Daza, peasant leader. Killed on the 29th April with his wife Delia Daza Rodríguez, son Cristian Narváez Daza, and granddaughter of 14 years old Jeny Catherine López Narváez.
20. Wencelasao Guerrero, peasant leader. Killed on the 30th April.
21. Javier García Guaguarabe, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 16th May.
22. Cristian Conda, Indigenous leader. Killed in the 23rd May.

23. María Nelly Cuetia Dagua, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 29th May.
24. Pedro Angel María Trochez, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 29th May.
25. Julio Humberto Moreno Arce, peasant leader. Killed on the 3rd June.
26. Jesús Antonio Rivera, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 14th June.
27. Gracelio Micolta Mancilla, Afro-Colombian Leader. Killed on the 17th June.
28. Miriam Vargas, Indigenous leader. Killed on the 26th June.

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