

Eco-Blogs

Columbian Journey

by Scott Nicholson

Scott Nicholson is a volunteer for [Witness for Peace](#). For many years I have enjoyed reading Scott's emails written from deep inside the lush landscapes of Columbia. Though, he doesn't have a dedicated blog due to his remote location, I think he deserves one for his sincere dedication to ecological and social justice. Below are a few of Scott's letters from his ongoing Columbian Journey. ~~ Lucinda

March 17th, 2009

Subject: **Free At Last**

Dear friends,

My friend Flor Diaz was released from the Arauca City prison last month and was finally able to return to her home here in Arauquita. We went out on the Arauca River with her youngest children, Viviana and Fernando, on March 10 to watch the herons returning to roost for the evening. There were hundreds of herons in the trees along the river and it was wonderful to enjoy that beauty and freedom with her.

Flor spent three years and four days in prison for "rebellion." She was the secretary general of the Arauca Peasant Association and she told me that she was imprisoned because of her work in support of human rights. "I can't ignore the suffering of others," she said.

Marcela, her oldest daughter, was 18 years old when Flor was detained by the secret police on February 14, 2006. Marcela had to assume the responsibility for her three siblings: Viviana (who was just 8 years old), Fernando and Edwin. "It was very hard when they would call me and tell me there wasn't any food in the house," Flor said. "I would ask myself, 'What can I do?'"

Flor worked for 14 years as a health practitioner in the rural communities of Arauca and also served as a catechist. She continued with her vocations while she was in prison. She would care for the other prisoners when they were ill, and she also helped organize prayer and mass.

"Suffering makes you strong," Flor said. "If you've never suffered, you can't be strong. I would get very disappointed when I received bad news about my case. I would argue with God: 'You abandoned me! I don't want anything more to do with you!' But then I would remember the gift of my children."

Flor's first grandchild, Camila, was born on December 20, 2006. "I saw her for the first time on January 21, 2007," said Flor. Marcela would take Camila to visit Flor in prison every three months.

“For the first two years of her life, ‘Grandmother’s house’ was the largest mansion in Arauca,” Marcela said jokingly.

"Oil and war are the cause of poverty here. What do we get from supplying the war machine?: widows and poverty. We're going to stop supplying that machine. It already has enough."
Flor

Being in prison for three years was a very hard experience but it's also an adjustment being outside of prison after all that time. "I couldn't see long distance," Flor said, because there aren't any open views in the prison. "I also wasn't used to the noise in town. All I heard in my cell was the sound of the fan."

Flor told me about a conversation she had recently with a fellow prisoner who had also just been released. They talked about the process of adjustment. Flor said to him, "I'm not doing well either (she's unemployed and in debt), but I am free."

As we were alongside the river, Flor explained "Oil and war are the cause of poverty here. What do we get from supplying the war machine?: widows and poverty. We're going to stop supplying that machine. It already has enough. Let's look at the situation of poverty and invest that money to meet the needs of the people."

In love and solidarity,

Scott

December 14th, 2008

Subject: **Becoming a God Parent**

Dear friends,

My friends Alba and Eulices asked me to be the godfather for their son Kuss Bryan, who was baptized on December 8 (see attached photo). It was a joy and an honor to become part of their family that day.

Alba is an amazingly strong and resilient person. Her left shoulder was shattered in the bombing of Santo Domingo in December 1998 when she was 16 years old, her father was killed by FARC guerrillas in March 2006, and her spouse Eulices was imprisoned during the mass arrest in Fortul in August 2006.

Residents of Santo Domingo were holding a bazaar on December 13, 1998 to raise funds for their community. Planes and helicopters began circling overhead and the people gathered on the highway that runs through town, waving white cloths to indicate that they were civilians. Two cluster bombs were dropped alongside the highway – killing 17 people (including seven children) and wounding 25

others. Yesterday was the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the bombing.

Shrapnel from the bombs tore into Alba's shoulder and into the right leg of her sister, Xiomara. As we sat in their kitchen after the baptism, they began talking about that day. "We're lucky to be alive" said Alba. Xiomara then showed me the large scar on her upper leg.

Wilson Garcia, their father, was the community president. "There wasn't a phone in Santo Domingo," said Alba, "so he went to Betoeyes (when the planes began flying overhead) to call the Red Cross. He saw us as he was coming back and we were leaving on the truck with the wounded. He didn't know which one of us he should attend to first."

The cluster bombs were manufactured in the U.S. and the coordinates for the bombing were given by U.S. crew members operating a surveillance plane for AirScan. Occidental Petroleum (based in Los Angeles) contracted AirScan (based in Florida) to provide security for the pipeline that transports oil from Occidental's Cano Limon oilfield in the state of Arauca to the Caribbean coast. I found myself thinking about those connections as I looked at the scar on Xiomara's leg.

I met Wilson my first day here in Saravena in June 2004. I was impressed by his soft-spoken manner and deep commitment to his community. He told me what had happened to Alba and Xiomara, and it was obvious that he loved them both very much. Two years later, on March 22, 2006, Wilson was killed by the FARC. As Alba and Xiomara talked to me about their father, tears welled up in their eyes.

Alba gave birth to her first child, Kuss, on December 1, 2005. Eight months later, Eulices was arrested along with 15 other people in Fortul. I met Eulices in Arauca City when I traveled there with a human rights lawyer, two days after the arrests, to visit the prisoners. I met Alba two weeks later when she came to the Joel Sierra Human Rights Foundation office in Saravena to discuss his case.

Eulices was charged with rebellion and terrorism, and the prosecutor's office alleged that he was an ELN militia member and recruiting for the FARC – not a very plausible accusation given the fight between those two guerrilla groups in Arauca. He was in prison on Kuss' first birthday and he was finally released on June 9, 2007.

After Kuss was baptized, Eulices turned to me and called me "Compadre" (the godfather of my child). During the reception in their home, Alba also started calling me Compadre. I expressed my appreciation to them for inviting me to be Kuss' godfather and Alba responded, "We couldn't think of a better person."

In love and solidarity,

Scott

December 4th, 2008

Subject: **Death of a Friend**

Dear friends,

My friend Carlos Cabrera was killed in Arauquita on November 28. He was forcibly removed from his home, taken to the outskirts of town, and then shot and killed. He was the secretary general of the Arauquita Displaced Persons Association, which represents people who have been forced to flee from their homes because of the violence. He had a spouse and two young daughters, and it appears that he was killed by ELN guerrillas.

The situation here in the state of Arauca is deteriorating rapidly. The week before Carlos was killed, an explosive was set off in the entrance of the social organizations building in Saravena – shattering windows on the first and second floors. A fragmentation grenade was thrown over the front gate of the Saravena Community Water Company on November 25 – causing slight damage to the exterior of the building. Eight people were killed, and two people were wounded, between November 23 and 29 in Arauca (total population is less than 300,000 people).

The two guerrilla groups in Arauca (FARC and ELN) have been fighting against each other for the past three years, and that conflict is worsening. Both groups have targeted civilians that they view as supporting the other side. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands have had to flee from their homes in the countryside.

I traveled in a bus filled with Carlos' friends from Arauquita to Fortul for the wake and funeral on November 30. I met his spouse Luz Mila and their two daughters – Luz Linney (8 years old) and Clara Lisbet (3 years old).

I was overwhelmed by the intelligence and insight of Luz Linney. She came up to me and very politely asked if she could ask me a question. She wanted to know where I was from and I responded by asking if it looked to her like I was from Colombia – which elicited a smile and laughter.

She asked me later on why I was taking so many photos and if I was a reporter. I told her that I'm somewhat like a reporter in that I send reports to people in the United States about life here in Arauca.

The next day, she sat down next to me and said, "Yesterday was hard. Today is better...How have things been going for you?" She then asked if people in Colombia receive my reports. She has relatives in Bogotá who weren't able to attend the funeral and she was concerned that they would see the photos. "If they see the photos, they'll be very sad," she told me.

She then asked to see the photos. Some of the images reflect intense pain and sadness, and at one point I told her we could look at the photos some other time. "Let's keep going," she replied.

After we looked at all the photos, she said "You didn't get a photo of my uncle when he was crying so

hard.” I replied that I try to take a few photos that show people’s emotions but I also try to respect their privacy (a balance that is difficult to achieve). She seemed to understand because she said, “Some of the photos are sad, some are happy, and some are neither one nor the other.” We then looked at a few of the photos in reverse order as she told me which were sad, happy, or neither one.

The conversation with Luz Linney took place in the home of Maria Ruth (where I stay in Arauquita). Maria Ruth and Carlos were close friends, and she is very concerned that she and her spouse Armando could also be targeted by the ELN. Maria Ruth is the Arauquita representative of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, a member of the Arauquita municipal council, and a leader of the Democratic Alternative Pole opposition party. She traveled to Montana and the Northwest for a speaking tour in April. Maria Ruth and her family will be leaving Arauca for a while because of the increasing threat against them.

In love and solidarity,

Scott

November 20th, 2008

Subject: **Explosions target our home**

Dear friends,

Last night at 8:35 P.M., an explosive was set-off in the entrance of the social organizations building where I live in Saravena. No one was hurt but windows were shattered on the first and second floors of the building (see attached photos). I was in Arauquita at the time and I returned here early this morning.

The explosive didn’t contain any shrapnel and it appears that the intention was to scare and intimidate us, rather than hurt anyone. Leaders of the social organizations that operate in the building believe that the explosive was set-off either by a FARC guerrilla or a government agent.

The guerrillas of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Army of Liberation) have been fighting against each other for the past three years here in the state of Arauca. Both groups profess to be fighting against the Colombian government to achieve social justice, but their conflict in Arauca is solely about the control of territory and economic resources.

In addition to killing each other, the FARC and ELN have also been operating like death squads in Arauca – displacing and killing civilians that they view as supporting the other side. They've also created a situation in which anyone could take action (set-off an explosive or kill someone) and make it look like it was part of the fight between the two groups.

The social organizations building is located in the center of Saravena – one-and-a-half blocks from a police guard post, two-and-a-half blocks from another guard post, and just four blocks from the police station.

The various social organizations have written public denunciations about the explosion and are determined to continue forward with their non-violent struggle for social justice.

I'll be moving to a room on the third floor later today – further away from the street and with bulletproof glass.

In love and solidarity,

Scott