

BY SARA BERNDT

Politics of Fear

For Gloria Mendez, the precarious reality of war in Colombia seems to be entirely divorced from the political news that dominates coverage of the conflict. For countless Colombians like her, the war simply exists, and they must try to cope with it.

Mendez, 31, lives and works near the Pacific coast of Colombia as a midwife and as an organizer with the National Process of Black Communities, a group that advocates for the estimated 8.5 million Colombians who claim some African heritage. She helps civilian victims of the conflict recover from the devastating physical and psychological effects of life in a war zone. (Her work is so dangerous that her name and the names of towns in this story have been changed.)

In April, Mendez visited Chicago, hoping to draw attention to the problems in Colombia. "I really want people to know the reality of the situation that many of us Colombians are living," she says.

She describes how the war has progressed in a community near hers. "First, the guerrillas moved in, and they killed people and took control of the zone. And once they had left, the paramilitaries came in and did the very same thing. They killed people both for having 'collaborated with the guerrillas,' and also to take control."

Most analysts date the current Colombian civil war from 1964, when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) began operating out of the jungles east of the Andes. The Colombian military, accused by its critics of corruption and widespread human rights abuses, battles both left-wing groups, which make their money primarily from extortion, drug smuggling and kidnappings.

Since the mid-'90s, the largest right-wing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), has worked closely with the military, doing its dirty work in rural areas with brutal counterinsurgency techniques. As a result of the war, more than 2 million citizens have been driven from their homes and towns.

But it's not necessary to understand the politics to understand the problems for average Colombians, whose lives are controlled by the fighting. In April 2001, paramilitaries massacred dozens of people, some with chain-

saws, and displaced thousands in a days-long operation along a river near Mendez's hometown of Santa Elena.

Soon after, a man arrived warning of a paramilitary incursion into the neighboring town of Boyacá. "This, of course, caused panic," Mendez says. "We began to think, who was killed? Who was able to run up into the hillsides around the river? And then we found out that there were seven who had been killed in the worst way possible, not with a chainsaw, but with an axe."

The people of Santa Elena barely had time to process this news before those fleeing from Boyacá began to arrive en masse.

"When they arrived they had no place to stay," Mendez says. "There would be five or six families in one house." To help the refugees, she says, "We put into place a food-gathering campaign, ask[ing] that people in the region provide for the people who had just gotten there until assistance arrived."

Mendez says that displaced people usually receive humanitarian aid from both the Colombian government's social services and the Catholic Church. But the harsh reality of living in the midst of war means that what aid the Boyacá residents did get "wasn't really enough."

Soon after the killings, government agencies tried to get the townspeople to return to Boyacá. But Mendez says they "refuse to go back, because of the fear. So everybody that lived in Boyacá basically created a new neighborhood in [another] community upriver." With her group's help, she says, the refugees were able to stay in their region rather than move to a city, where they would have known no one and

been less likely to find long-term assistance.

The situation on the coast is still tense. Few massacres have occurred in the last year, Mendez says, "but now they're killing people individually, when they leave the region." The people of Santa Elena are still anxious about their most basic needs. "What we're really concerned about right now is food security, since we know that [armed] groups control the supply of food to the region."

Mendez knows the United States has sent nearly \$2 billion in aid, the majority of which has gone to the military, to Colombia since 2000. "The type of aid that the United States



PIERO POMPOLI / GETTY

Two women stand over massacre victims killed in February 2001 by the FARC. Witnesses say the civilians were accused of sympathizing with paramilitary forces.

is giving is not the kind we want," she says. "If in fact the United States really wants to help the people [of Colombia], they should be doing it [by] addressing where the problem of violence really comes from: the social inequality."

It doesn't seem to matter to her which armed group is responsible—she just wants the war to stop. "Maybe it isn't something that I'll ever see," she says, "but I would hope that the people in my community would be able to live in peace, in good conditions. What I'm doing, somebody has to do." ■



The Path to Peace

Sierra Leone
emerges
from
10 years
of brutal
civil war

By Greg Campbell

Like many others whose arms were amputated by the drugged teen-age rebels of the Revolutionary United Front, Ismael Dalramy pleaded with his captors to kill him when he saw the fate that awaited him in 1996. But like the others in the small West African nation of Sierra Leone, his desperate plea was ignored—and the blade of a crudely made ax was slammed through the bones of his arm.

Dalramy became one of thousands of amputation victims, walking symbols not only of the RUF's depravity, but of the message they wanted to spread to their countrymen: that people without hands couldn't use them to cast votes against the rebels.

On May 14, 2002, Dalramy and hundreds of others like him, proved the RUF wrong during an election that was every bit as tense and dramatic as the war it sought to officially end.

Sierra Leone should have been the Saudi Arabia of West Africa, with its vast wealth of diamonds, gold, bauxite and rutile. While Freetown was a fairly modern city, most upcountry cities and villages were linked only by crumbling blacktop roads or rutted mud paths. Health care, educational facilities and utilities were woefully inadequate there. When it first invaded from Liberia in 1991, the RUF tapped into rampant upcountry disenfranchisement with the government in Freetown, which many believed had plundered the country's wealth at the expense of the 85 percent of the population that lived in the bush.

Since 1991, Sierra Leone has been a killing field the size of South Carolina. RUF rebels battled government soldiers, indigenous militias, mercenary armies, regional security forces and U.N. peacekeepers for control of the country, which sends \$25 million to \$125 million worth of gemstones per year into the maw of the international diamond industry.

When the United Nations finally disarmed the rebels and declared the war over in January of this year, Sierra Leone was little more than smoking, bone-filled corpse of a nation populated with mutilated civilians and some 50,000 recently disarmed and unemployed guerrilla fighters. The battered nation seemed only a thin excuse away from yet another plunge into anarchy and slaughter. The recipe for this disaster seemed to be the elections themselves, an ominous final showdown between three of the various factions that have torn the country apart since the beginning of the war.

Among those vying for leadership of the country were Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, the man elected president in 1996, whose call for his countrymen to "join hands for the future" spurred the RUF to sharpen their blades and deliver bags of amputated human limbs to the presidential palace in Freetown; Johnny Paul "J.P." Koroma, a junta leader who overthrew Kabbah in an apocalyptic 1997 coup alongside the RUF; and the RUF itself, under the flag of its fledgling political wing, the Revolutionary United Front Party (RUFF). Even the party's campaign slogan was a thinly veiled threat: "Only the RUFF can ensure peace."