With peace in our hands

Stories that sustain life

WITH PEACE IN OUR HANDS
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Introduction

Ten years ago, Colombia reached a defining milestone in its recent history.

The President of the Republic and the then-commander-in-chief of the FARC-EP shook hands following the signing of the Peace Agreement, symbolizing the end of a long era of armed confrontation. More than 13,600 individuals left the war behind, and thousands of weapons were decommissioned. For a nation profoundly scarred by violence, that moment opened a horizon of hope and a genuine path toward peace.

But what followed that signing? What has happened in the territories where, for sixty years, war deeply impacted daily life? What became of the more than ten million victims of the armed conflict—nearly 20% of the country's population, according to the Truth Commission? What happened to those who signed the Peace Agreement and remained to safeguard what was promised? How have the towns and communities that had to rebuild their lives while tending to their wounds stayed standing?

"With Peace in Our Hands" seeks to navigate the answers to these questions through the life stories of a group of leaders who have refused to let peace—at times fragile and unstable—fade away. These are individuals who took up the mantle of defending human dignity and the territories they call home.

The narratives shared here were born from "Sustaining Peace," an initiative funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Territorial Renewal Agency (ART), with the support of the Police Unit for Peacebuilding (UNIPEP).

Together, they supported the realization of 137 initiatives within the Development Programs with a Territorial Focus (PDET), all designed by the people themselves. These proposals

seek to reclaim the memory of wounded communities to ensure history does not repeat itself. They include the creation of safe spaces for women and girls, Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, and diverse populations—ranging from women's centers and community halls to cultural and spiritual hubs. Above all, these initiatives allowed for a return to collective thinking after a war that unraveled community threads and sowed deep institutional mistrust.

In many cases, these spaces are the culmination of dreams pursued over many years—long-awaited projects that represented the possibility of encounter, collective creation, and the organized effort required to guarantee a dignified life and the sustainability of peace.

In these pages, peace appears as a daily exercise in organization, governance, and the stewardship of the commons. It is the work of Dilan, Isabel, María Esilda, María Ximena, Erika, Malán, and Marinella, who sustain both life and peace through memory, weaving, farming, women's networks, local agreements, and traditional knowledge.

The stories are set in Caquetá, Algeciras (Huila), and Southern Tolima—regions prioritized by the PDETs, which were created by the Peace Agreement to stabilize and develop rural areas, promoting comprehensive transformation through community participation, while also supporting regions deeply impacted by war in their processes of reconciliation, the rebuilding of coexistence, and cultural transformation toward peace.

This book is a testament to how grassroots leadership, viewed through diverse and differential lenses, has allowed life to prevail.

Prologue

Betting on peace: when accompanying territories becomes a decision

The decision to bet on peace is never neutral or automatic. It means taking a stand for life, for slow processes, and for transformations that are not always immediately visible. KOICA decided to accompany peacebuilding in Colombia precisely for this reason: because it understood that, beyond signed agreements, real peace is forged in the territories and in the everyday lives of the people who inhabit them.

Colombia is a country that has lived for decades with armed conflict, but also with an enormous capacity for resilience. In regions such as Caquetá, Tolima, and Huila, the impact of violence became intertwined with inequality, exclusion, and institutional fragility. There, peace could not be conceived as a quick endpoint, but rather as a process that demands sustained presence and deep listening. KOICA found in these territories not only urgent needs, but also communities with knowledge, leadership, and a willingness to transform their history.

From its own experience as a country that went through war and reconstruction, the Republic of Korea recognizes that lasting peace requires time, social cohesion, and real opportunities. That historical memory is one of the reasons that drives KOICA to engage in post-agreement contexts: because it knows that development and peace are not imposed—they are accompanied. To accompany means to

walk alongside communities, respect their rhythms, and strengthen their capacities so that changes endure beyond any project.

This book brings together stories that explain better than any report why this commitment makes sense. In the voices of those who lived through the conflict and are now building alternatives, a shared conviction is revealed: peace is possible when someone decides to stay, to listen, and to believe in local processes. That is where KOICA chose to be.

—

JungWook Lee

Director of KOICA Colombia

Caring for peace: hope woven at the local level

A decade has passed since Colombia dared to dream of ending sixty years of war. Today, that dream does not merely rest in the pages of history; as this book illustrates, it lives within every Colombian, particularly in the resilient hands of those who cultivate the countryside. As the IOM Colombia's Chief of Mission, I have had the privilege of accompanying this journey for the past three years. I can say with certainty that peace is not a static event signed in a distant capital; it is a daily exercise in conviction, patience, courage, and the unwavering will to rebuild.

This book, "With Peace in Our Hands," is a living testament to "Sustaining Peace," a joint initiative of IOM and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). Designed to bolster peacebuilding efforts led by the Colombian government and civil society, these pages do not recount the horrors of war. Instead, they offer chronicles of resilience and reconciliation, featuring protagonists who are transforming the future from the ground up.

The regions where this initiative took root have felt the heaviest burdens of conflict: a scarce state presence, profound inequality, and a social fabric torn by violence. In Caquetá, Huila, and Southern Tolima, we are helping to mend those broken threads, transforming deep-seated mistrust into enduring bonds of life.

Our compass is the vital nexus between humanitarian action, sustainable development, and peacebuilding. We recognize that providing emergency assistance to save lives is only the beginning. True assistance must translate into the tools for long-term autonomy and processes that heal societal wounds to prevent the recurrence of violence. By working directly in the territories, we place rights, people, and communities at the center, recognizing them as the true architects of their own reconciliation and development.

Through these pages, the reader will come to understand that sustainable peace is impossible without the autonomy and integration that Erika and Malán achieve through their coffee, or that Marinella cultivates through song and soil in Algeciras, Huila. There is no future without the memory rescued by Dilan, the young guardian in San José de Fragua, Caquetá, and no reconciliation without the ancestral wisdom of leaders like María Ximena in Chaparral, Tolima or the healing artistry of María Esilda in Rioblanco, Tolima.

The voices captured here belong to those who sustain community life, restore trust, and forge new spaces for encounter. Their experiences prove that peace is expressed in simple gestures, in neighborly solidarity, and in the daily choice to strive for coexistence. In Colombia, hope is not a distant concept; it is a vibrant reality felt in every corner where a community decides, together, to safeguard peace.

—

Fernando Medina Donoso

Head of Mission - Colombia
International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Building and sustaining peace

Just over nine years ago, Colombia and the international community witnessed a historic milestone: the signing of the Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace between the Colombian State and the former FARC-EP. A cornerstone of this Agreement's implementation is the Development Programs with a Territorial Focus (PDETs). These programs are designed to uplift the regions most acutely impacted by poverty, violence, illicit crop cultivation, and systemic institutional fragility.

Under Decree Law 893 of 2017, 170 municipalities—organized into 16 subregions—were designated as PDET beneficiaries. The mandate for institutional coordination was entrusted to the Territorial Renewal Agency (ART), an institution I am honored to lead under the administration of President Gustavo Petro.

The PDET territories encompass more than one-third of our national geography and are home to over five million Colombians. Notably, these regions contain more than 40% of the country's strategic ecosystems, making their stability fundamental to the environmental sustainability of both Colombia and the planet.

To bridge socioeconomic gaps and ensure comprehensive well-being, the Peace Agreement mandated the creation

of Action Plans for Territorial Transformation (PATRs) for each subregion through a deeply participatory process. This framework resulted in the approval of over 33,000 community-led initiatives across eight thematic pillars, including reconciliation, coexistence, and peacebuilding.

Within this context, a 2022 partnership between the ART and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) secured over USD 6 million to fund the "Sustaining Peace" project. Implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), this project focuses on mobilizing community initiatives for reconciliation and peace building. Specifically, it strengthens social and community infrastructure across four municipalities in the Southern Tolima subregion and 17 municipalities in the Caguán and Caquetá Foothills subregion.

Key infrastructure projects include the construction and renovation of rural community centers, women's centers, ethnic community spaces, and historical memory sites. These facilities are not merely physical structures; they are vital hubs for social dialogue, memory, the enjoyment of rights, and peaceful conflict resolution. Our goal is for these spaces to become enduring territorial assets that help mend the social fabric torn by decades of violence and conflict.

The project seeks, as a cross-cutting objective, to strengthen community capacities for violence prevention and the empowerment of local leaders—both men and women—as fundamental actors in the transformation of their territories.

According to the beneficiary communities themselves, 'Sustaining Peace' serves as a powerful testament that territorial peace is attainable when local voices lead through meaningful participation in decision-making, direct resource management, and long-term stewardship of their own development. It clearly demonstrates that peace flourishes when national, departmental, and municipal governments—

alongside international partners and grassroots organizations—advance in unison, anchored by mutual trust, shared responsibility, and a common vision for the future.

—

Raúl Delgado Guerrero

Director of the Territorial Renewal Agency (ART)

Chapter 1

Caquetá



Life has prevailed in Caquetá. It is a biodiversity corridor and a key regulator of water. But above all, it is a territory sustained by its people, who dream of staying, putting down roots, and building a future.

Within the vast Amazon rainforest, which blankets 42 percent of Colombia, lies Caquetá: a department spanning 88,965 square kilometers that has endured the full spectrum of the nation's history. Situated in the far southeast, at the foot of the Eastern Andes, it marks the precise threshold where the cordillera yields to the sprawling Amazonian plains. This "hinge" status—connecting the Colombia of jagged peaks and bustling coasts with the Colombia of humid jungles and mighty rivers—rendered it a strategic theater for some of the most defining events of recent history. Its capital, Florencia, is aptly known as "The Golden Gate of the Amazon."

The 17th century brought religious missions that evangelized and fragmented indigenous cultures. By the 19th century, a global hunger for rubber enslaved, displaced, and decimated at least 30,000 indigenous people across the Amazon. This cycle of violence and dispossession would later repeat under different guises. The "rubber fever" gave way to successive manias for cocoa, quinine (quina), tagua, wild animal pelts, ornamental fishery and timber. Eventually, these were replaced by the booms of coca cultivation and extensive cattle ranching. Each was a "fever" of predatory extraction.

Despite these scars, life in Caquetá has proved resilient. The territory serves as a vital ecological bridge, acting as a corridor for genetic exchange of fauna and flora and a crucial water regulator for the country. It is irrigated by the crystal-clear waters of Andean-born rivers -the Caquetá, Caguán, Guayas, and Fragua Chorroso- and murky-water rivers of the plains -the Yarí, Ajajú, Tunía, Peneya, and Cuemaní. These ecosystems harbor nearly 14% of Colombia's recorded species (80,346), including 378 endemic species found nowhere else on Earth[1].

The region is also a cultural tapestry, woven from the traditions of the plains and jungle, and the ancestral wisdom of indigenous peoples —Andaquíes, Koreguaje, Murui Muina, and Inga— who have preserved these forests for millennia as their home and lifeline. There, in addition, are strategic ecosystems for the country's climate balance: 108 protected areas, including the Serranía de Chiribiquete National Natural Park. This territory, shared with Guaviare, houses the oldest pictographic complex in the Americas: an array of 70,000 human, animal, geometric and abstract figures traced over 20,000 years ago, representing one of the continent's earliest artistic expressions[2].

In the 20th century, the paths leading to Caquetá became trails of uncertainty for peasants and indigenous people. They were lured by economic booms, the illusion of owning land, the rise of coca crops, or driven by the encroaching shadow of war, forcing them to leave everything behind. Its forests and savannas also witnessed the arrival and settlement of armed

1. *Colombian Biodiversity Information System (SIB), accessed December 5, 2025, https://cifras.biodiversidad.co/caqueta.*

2. *Carlos Castaño-Uribe, Archaeological surveys in the Serranía de Chiribiquete: an approach to the ancestral knowledge of the Center of the World," Revista Colombia Amazónica. Nueva Época, No. 10 (December 2017): 79, Amazon Institute of Scientific Research (SINCHI), https://sinchi.org.co/revista-colombia-amazonica-x.*

groups from all sides, who found in its geography a trench, a hiding place, and a stage to deploy their force.

In the late 1960s, the FARC-EP guerrilla (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army) made its first appearance in this territory and, during the following decade, consolidated its presence and power[3]. The 1980s brought the incursion of the Medellín and Cali cartels, who set up their crops and laboratories in the jungle[4]. In that same decade, the M-19 (April 19 Movement) guerrilla arrived; in the nineties, paramilitarism. In 1999, it was the setting for a failed peace process with the FARC-EP. In 2000, it saw the war hit rock bottom.

In 2016, it celebrated the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC-EP and experienced a transitory tranquility. Meanwhile, its jungle burned like never before, a victim of the uncontrolled expansion of cattle, illegal roads, and illicit crops. By December 2025, the Victims' Unit recorded 260,622 victims of the armed conflict in this department: roughly 61.3 percent of its 425,053 inhabitants.

Today, while the land remains a magnet for extraction, the communities serve as a barrier of resistance: those who sustain peace, demand reparation, keep memory alive, seek justice, rebuild, and dream of other destinies. In San José de Fragua, Dilan Carvajal converts his family's accumulated pain into memory. In Belén de los Andaquíes, Isabel González turns the wound of abandonment into collective action that unites women. Both are a form of healing for the historical wound of this territory.

3. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition* (CEV), *Inside Colombia: Territorial accounts of the armed conflict. Amazonia, Final Report*, Bogotá, 2022, 78.

4. *Truth Commission* (CEV), *Inside Colombia*, 72.



Sustaining peace through memory




GUARDIANES
DE LA MEMORIA
Caqueta

The green waters of the Fragua Chorroso river glide gently along the eastern face of San José de Fragua, revealing the sun-drenched stones on the riverbed. On this sunny Sunday morning, a sudden Amazonian downpour sends residents scurrying for cover in shops and restaurants. "Welcome to Caquetá," says Dilan Carvajal (born March 20, 2007) with a laugh. At 18 years old, he is a guardian of his municipality's memory: a town of 13,800 inhabitants in the northwest of the department, where more than half of the residents have been declared victims of the armed conflict, according to the Victims' Unit[1].

Dilan has been a guardian of San José de Fragua's memory since 2024. But, in a way, he has been his family's memory guardian since he was a child, when he began to hear and store the details of everything they had been through: the murder of his grandfather and two uncles, the kidnappings of an aunt, and the forced displacement of his parents and three siblings. He himself, as a young child, knew fear when the guerrilla attempted to take over the town. His first image

1. *Single Registry of Victims* (RUV), *data as of November 14, 2025, https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/*



of the conflict is this: he is with his mother and siblings in the family's clothing store. Suddenly, sharp cracks are heard. Bullets. "My mom quickly closed the business and took us to the only room that had brick walls; she said bullets couldn't go through them. For two, three hours we heard gunfire. And my mom was crying, because she knew nothing of my dad."

As Dilan grew, he accumulated stories that became his own memory: those he heard in the street or at school, those he found in the books he rummaged through, and those told by the victims in their own voices. And also, those he lived himself. What does one do with all that accumulated pain? How is it named, where is it put? When a population has lived their entire existence in the midst of war, certain emotions and feelings harden or go into hiding. Silence, mistrust and fear prevail. Why speak? What is there to say when pain has touched everything? Dilan began discovering this little by little. But it wasn't easy.

The sky turns into a gray mass from which torrential rain falls. Dilan crosses his arms and fixes his eyes on it. He says there is nothing to worry about: in a few minutes it will leave, and an intense, all-encompassing sun will appear—the kind the Amazon knows how to paint in its sky. He waits out the rain at the Malecón restaurant, where his aunt, Nubia Carvajal, lived and managed a pool hall in 1985. "Once, my dad and mom came to a wedding in Yurayaco (a nearby village) and left their luggage and a package of chicks here. They went out for a walk and two blocks away a bomb exploded in the pool hall. That started a takeover that lasted from 2:00 in the afternoon until 5:00 the next morning."

The rain stops as abruptly as it arrived. Very quickly, the town resumes its Sunday pulse: mass, the market, breakfast in the street, and strolls along the boardwalk that guards the river, now swollen and furious. Dilan walks there with a reserved smile. "It's here," he says, pointing to a blue panel


GUARDIANES
DE LA MEMORIA

placed next to the bridge: The Memory Route. This open-air museum serves as a timeline of events that split the history of this municipality, besieged by war since the 1960s when coca crops began to multiply. The coca boom in southern Colombia marked the beginning and persistence of the armed conflict in this region. All guerrilla groups (the M-19, the People's Liberation Army-EPL, and the FARC-EP) benefited at some point in the chain, from collecting "taxes" from producers to the commercialization of the drug.

On the second panel of the tour, which spans a block, it reads: "Historical Memory. San José de Fragua. While the murmur of the Chorroso River accompanies your walk, we invite you to listen to the voices of those who, out of pain, have woven paths of resistance, healing, and hope. Each story is living memory to honor the dignity of the victims and remember that suffering must never be repeated." Here begins the memory route of a municipality that does not forget the 7,037 people displaced by the war, according to the Single Registry of Victims.

Dilan's family is counted in that number. In 2003, they were forced to leave Yurayaco, where they lived, with only what could fit in the hands of the mother—Edith Montero, from Huila—, the father—Iván Carvajal, from Caquetá—and three older siblings. They walked for two days to the center of San José after a group of guerrillas arrived in the village and gave the order to evacuate the houses, leave the doors open, and gather everyone in the central park. "They made them kneel," says Dilan, who has heard this story many times. "They pointed them out while saying: 'this one dies, this one doesn't.' They entered the houses and stole everything. They gave my family 24 hours to leave."

Dilan stands in front of the plaques that tell the story of his town and narrates, with authority, the tale behind each image. He points to one of them and mentions that Luis Francisco


HIPÓLITO
CARVAJAL CUELLAR
Líder comunitario e Inspector en Yurayaco
Por decir las cosas de frente, por no dejarse mandar ni callar, las FARC empezaron a verlo como un estorbo, lo amenazaron más de una vez, hasta que en 1990, un miliciano lo atacó con arma bla
en la Inspección de Sabaleta, quitándole la vida.
Así, en seco, nos dejaron sin papá, asesinar
secuestraron una hermana, al resto de fam
desplazarnos.
Aunque nos arrebataron media vida, el ejemplo de
nuestro padre sigue hablándonos al alma. Nos qui
pero no lograron apagar nuestra fuerza. Porque de tanto dolor,
aprendimos a resistir; y de tanto silencio, nació en nosotros la
necesidad de contar, de sanar, de construir un futuro donde
ninguna familia más tenga que huir para vivir.
KOICA
OIM

Parra was the founder of San José, officially recognized as a municipality in October 1985. He explains that two decades later, on the summit of the town's highest hill—the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Aranzazu, on the other side of the river—one of the most complex chapters of this history began to be written. The Tarqui Battalion was installed there "in response to the presence of the M-19 guerrilla group in the region," the plaque explains. It continues: "Under the pretext of seeking information about possible insurgents, the base commanders implemented repressive practices that gravely affected the civilian population."

The Hill of the Virgin still holds many secrets, Dilan says. For example, he asserts that the existence of a mass grave which, according to the community, lies there, has not been investigated. At the same time, Dilan recognizes that San José has been able to give that place new meaning, turning it even into a symbol of "faith, hope, and reconciliation," as read on the Memory Route. It is a center for ceremony and spirituality—a temple to honor the victims. That mountain is also Dilan's green refuge in the early hours of the morning. He climbs it to watch the sunrise from the highest point in town, to breathe the purest air.

About halfway through the Memory Route, Dilan takes a long pause. "This is where my family's story begins," he says, pointing to the panel with the name of Hipólito Carvajal Cuellar, a community leader and inspector in Yurayaco: his grandfather. "They murdered him because he wouldn't stay silent," he says, and then reads the text from the plaque: "The FARC-EP began to see him as a hindrance; they threatened him more than once until, in 1990, a militiaman attacked him with a knife in the Sabaleta inspection, taking his life."

Next to Hipólito Carvajal—who appears in an illustration wearing a suit jacket and tie, with carefully trimmed black hair and mustache, thin eyebrows, and a prominent nose—

are two men with similar features: his sons Luis Eduardo, a soldier, and Gentil, a councilman, murdered in 2007 and 2012. Although she does not appear on that panel, his family also does not forget the two kidnappings suffered by Aunt Nubia María—the same woman who managed the pool hall next to the boardwalk where the bomb exploded. Once at the hands of the guerrilla and, another time, by paramilitaries.

Across 23 panels, the Memory Route calls upon San José de Fragua not to forget. Because to forget—as Dilan says—is to run the risk of these events repeating themselves. Behind the tour are long days of creation, conversations, research, and writing by a working group made up of young guardians of memory like Dilan and members of the San José de Fragua Victims' Desk, supported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Colombia, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and the Territorial Renovation Agency (ART), who backed this project.

"We started by asking ourselves if we knew anyone in town who had been a victim. And one person led us to another, and another, and another, and that's how we gradually linked the entire history of the municipality from various perspectives. We conducted interviews, and many people told us: 'This is the first time anyone has cared about what happened to me.' That phrase is deeply etched in my heart." The fragments of this story were brought together between April and June 2025. But Caquetá has been trying to organize its memory for much longer. In 2009, the Curiplaya Building—a massive white mansion of Republican architecture in the center of Florencia—became the Caquetá Museum. There, in the Indigenous, Settlers, and Memory rooms, the history of this territory is woven together—a history that for a long time was told only in whispers.

On July 2, the boardwalk avenue—one of the town's busiest streets—became an open memory museum, close to the

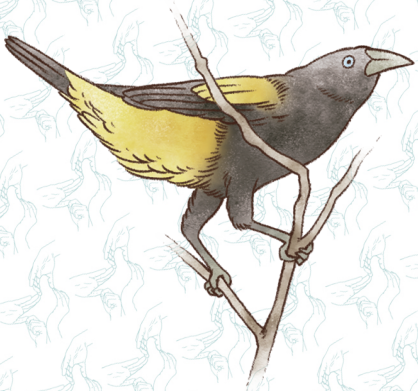
people, like someone wanting to tell a story while looking their listener in the eye. "The community is very impacted to see how everything is being brought to light in such a transparent way, yes. You are at home, you go out for a walk along the boardwalk to distract yourself a bit, and suddenly you find yourself being told what happened. And that makes you feel identified with what happened to you or your family," says Dilan.

It is Sunday, and large families walk along the San José boardwalk; men, women, and children dressed and groomed with care. A *vallenato* song fills the air, followed by a *salsa*, then a *bachata*. Sacks of fruits and vegetables arrive at the farmers' market. Movement begins in the restaurants as lunchtime approaches, and aromas waft from the kitchens. In the midst of all this—the routine, the daily landscape, the everyday life—is the memory route. That, says Dilan, is proof that in his town, memory occupies a special place.

It could be said that San José de Fragua, as a society, has made a commitment to not forgetting, and that in this silent decision—which lives in the streets, the walls, the river, and the voices of young people like Dilan—memory found the thread capable of uniting all generations on common ground: that life is sacred.







Sustaining peace by uniting the strength of women




NANÖKORÍ

Belén de los Andaquíes sits where the Andes Mountain range yields and the Amazonian plain begin to unfold. Half of the municipality is guarded by a very green and dense mountain chain. These mountains are covered in thick jungle that, in some patches, is new forest—naturally regenerated over the last decade after having been cattle pastures. At the center is the town: wide streets, low houses, large ancient trees providing ample shade, and on the left bank of the urban area, its mother river, the Pescado. Over all of this hangs a silence, a sustained silence that stretches along the solitary streets. The other half of the municipality is the Amazonian plain which, seen from above, looks like a green sea without shores.

This same division was, for years, the strategy used by armed groups to split the territory and dominate it in fragments: the guerrilla in the mountains, the Army in the town center, and the paramilitaries in the Amazonian basin. And the people? Hemmed in. Unprotected. At the center of fear and despair. In this setting, Isabel González (born September 26, 1989), 36 years old, a biologist and defender of the rights of women and nature, found her calling. Becoming a leader was the space Isabel found to rewrite a destiny that seemed inevitable: armed violence had fractured community



life and forced people into hiding and silence to survive; gender violence normalized abandonment and abuse toward women; and violence against nature was gradually devouring the jungle that was both food and home.

Isabel studied biology at the University of the Amazon in Florencia, and when she finished, she returned to Belén. She had a job and a stable, quiet life until one event changed everything. "When I got pregnant, my partner left me. I had to mother alone. And that was very hard for me. Even though I was a professional with a promising career and a stable job, I felt a deep worry. I felt the emotional burden of those rigid family concepts that had structured my life. And one day, six months after my daughter was born, I lost my job. Everything shattered. That day I said: 'I don't have to carry this alone.'"

Long before that happened, as a girl of about five—olive-skinned, slight of build, shy, and nervous—she sees herself walking with her father, Erasmo González, through the town streets and rural districts. She sees him gathered with friends and prominent townspeople, talking about what worried and impassioned him most: the conservation of the jungle. They spoke of deforestation and pollution. They spoke of the effects of climate change on the future, back in the 80s, when global warming was still seen as a distant, unknown topic. "If someone spoke of that back then, well, they were considered crazy." Her father's leadership began to seep into her blood and started to trace her own story.

"In my family, our motto has always been to make peace with nature, because that has also been a link affected by violence; it wasn't just social. They spoke of the need for processes of not only adaptation but also mitigation. They spoke of conserving water and forests. Here, that seemed like madness because there was water everywhere, there was forest everywhere; they never thought it could actually run out. Everyone dismissed them as crazy," Isabel recounts.

Thus, the Tierra Viva Foundation was born, formally created in 1993. "That work was somewhat frustrated in the early 2000s due to all the violence," she says.

The Truth Commission narrates that around 1978, the M-19 arrived in Belén and established schools for political and military training. In the eighties, it was the FARC-EP. And in the late nineties, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). At that moment, the war reached its highest level of cruelty and degradation. "Everything began to darken," Isabel says. "The guerrilla began to carry out takeovers. Then the Army arrived and entrenched itself right in one of the places that had been declared an ecopark, a reserve. It was no longer possible to carry out planting or wetland protection processes, because those who went out to the brush, to the countryside, were considered guerrillas. People from the countryside could no longer come to town because they carried that same stigma." The paramilitaries also imposed practices of extreme violence.

Thirty kilometers from Belén, the AUC turned the Monseñor Gerardo Valencia Cano school in Puerto Torres into a training center "where they taught not only combat techniques or political formation, but gave classes on torture, disappearance, and murder,"[1] wrote the Truth Commission. Very close by, they also installed a landing strip. The war was boiling. In 2022, the largest mass displacement in Belén since 1985 was recorded: some 1,550 people left everything behind to flee the confrontations.

In this context, Isabel says things became difficult for those defending rights. Stigmatization fueled the violence: all parties to the conflict accused the population of collaborating with the enemy. Threats, displacements, murders of male and

1. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition, There is Future if there is Truth. Final Report. Volume 11, Inside Colombia: Territorial accounts of the armed conflict*, Vol. 2, *Amazonía*, 2022, 120.

female leaders, and disproportionate attacks against women multiplied. Isabel and her family lived through all of that. That is why in 2016, when the FARC-EP and the Government signed the Peace Agreement , they fully embraced the calm that, however fleeting, settled over the town. But at the same time, the jungle began to burn: massive portions were deforested to raise cattle, plant coca crops, and build roads. The fire devoured the forest while the hope for peace flickered out. In the midst of this context, Isabel gave birth to her daughter and began to face the most difficult moment of her life: the fall, and the starting over.

"Everything I thought was stable was lost. Finding work was difficult. I was even struggling to put food on the table for my own daughter. Then I felt an internal call that told me: 'Well, if it's not me, who is going to do it?' My life was always surrounded by many people who did everything. And I think that becomes a cultural thing: not waiting for someone to come and save your life." Her first act was to collectivize her pain, to name what she was living through, and to share it. She began to approach other women who also knew about abandonment and raising children alone.

According to the Truth Commission, the persistence of the armed conflict in Colombia is explained, in large part, by *machismo*. Abandonment is one face of that patriarchal culture. It leaves women immersed in economic violence that makes them even more vulnerable. Feeling this way is what led Isabel to join other women, to work to sustain themselves together. This was the origin of the Ayakuná Association of Women Entrepreneurs that she founded. "While we already knew how to defend ourselves in the territory, how to walk our territories and our communities, we didn't really know how we were going to make a living."

Ayakuná was born in 2019, and by late 2025, it brought together 85 Amazonian women, many of them victims of



war or single mothers. Its purpose was to regain economic autonomy based on the resources provided by the land. They wanted to take advantage of the forest's fruits while simultaneously promoting its care and regeneration. Ayakuná, which in the Quechua language means "spirit of the forest," represented the possibility of generating income without breaking the bond with the territory that sustains them.

The union of the women of Belén who have suffered violence became the force capable of rebuilding so many broken threads: trust, tranquility, care, and communal life. It has been a refuge for those who lost husbands, who suffered the recruitment or disappearance of their children, and who said goodbye to relatives, neighbors, and loved ones. An essential part of that process has been the appropriation of their rights. "Ignorance cages us, but knowledge allows us to look with different eyes," says Isabel. She explains that through "Sustaining the Peace," it has been possible to mobilize and socialize the women's public policy: a decalogue of actions, programs, strategies, and regulations that guarantee their rights and prevent violence against them. They traveled through rural districts and farms, calling on women to work collectively to understand and internalize this guide. Workshops were organized to talk about the violence that has marked them and strategies to protect themselves, explore business ideas to gain autonomy, reconstruct their histories on timelines, and highlight the most significant milestones of their struggle.

One of those milestones—which they celebrate with deep pride because it is the result of ten years of persistence, negotiating with various leaders, and working tirelessly—is the opening of the Women's House of Belén de los Andaquíes, inaugurated on November 22, 2025. Leader Rosa Facundo has been there from the beginning. She says that in this story, the call from the *Vicaría del Sur* (a group from the Archdiocese of Florencia) was key in getting the women of the municipality to

unite and organize. Rosa, a lifelong leader and councilwoman of Belén in 2010, joined the women's committee and, from there, saw that dream born: "We needed a meeting space and we started dreaming of having a plot of land, thinking each one could contribute a brick, sand, or whatever was necessary to build a women's house. We started requesting the plot from the municipality, but they didn't listen to us. There were always evasions and pretexts. One mayor left and another arrived."

Years passed. Despite the refusals, the women (organized in the Municipal Women's Desk and the Women's Community Council) kept insisting: they studied, trained in leadership, and built new plans. Furthermore, they inaugurated a tradition that allowed them to express their collective strength. They began to demonstrate in the streets. "In this town, people never marched or did anything of that kind; everything happened quietly. The first march was for non-violence against women," Rosa says. At the same time, the struggle to have their own space continued.

They managed to get the project included in the PDET (Development Programs with a Territorial Focus), a tool of the Peace Agreement between the FARC-EP and the Government that seeks to transform the rural areas most affected by the war. One of its pillars is centered on reconciliation, coexistence, and peacebuilding; it was on this pillar that the dream of the women of Belén rested. Finally, in 2025, the mayor's office assigned them a plot and, with the support of IOM, KOICA, and ART, construction began on a white and purple house shaded by a Spanish lime (*mamoncillo*) tree, which would be named "Alma Andakí." On the day of the inauguration, the women drew a path of flowers leading to the house to honor the work and perseverance that led them there.

The Women's House will be co-managed by the municipality and by them. It will be their safe place to meet, study, strengthen their voices, create, and continue dreaming. Dreaming, as Isabel dreamed as a child, walking through the mountains of Belén holding her father's hand. She dreamed of living in a house in the middle of the forest to care for it, breathe its air, and be at peace. And there she is, at 36 years old, sitting in a plastic chair in a house under construction high in the mountains, on a fragment of land she converted into a reserve and named "Ater Tumti," which means "heaven on earth." There she is, in a room without windows that serves as her dining room, amidst her daughter's toys scattered on the floor.

From there, Isabel looks out at the Amazonian plain that seems infinite and shares that in recent months they have spotted collared peccaries, agoutis, small oncillas, titi monkeys, and gliding squirrels. She smiles as she says that from this place, which she calls her temple, it is possible to see the "flying rivers" of the Amazon, which she describes as white, blue, and gray auroras borealis; that every day, huge flocks of *arrendajos* —black and yellow birds — pass before her eyes and she never loses her sense of wonder. "In moments when I was having a very hard time with my mental health, my father would bring me here, back when nothing had been built yet, and he would say: 'Daughter, when you understand that everything is here, in this forest, you are going to find peace.'" And there is Isabel, finally, in her house in the mountains, breathing slowly, with no other pretension than to let her eyes take in the green sea before her.





“Women are essential to rebuilding the social fabric. They have never wavered, showing a profound ability to start anew and restore communal life, despite everything and against all odds”

Truth Commission of Colombia, My Body Tells the Truth, Final Report.

Chapter 2

Huila



Huila is a land of profound dualities. While it has wept rivers of sorrow, its mountains simultaneously give birth to the great waters that sustain life. The people here share the deep fertility of their soil: an inexhaustible, persistent capacity to transform adversity into new growth.

If one were to gaze upon the cultivated expanse of Huila—which blankets over 67 percent of its 19,890 square kilometers[1] —it would resemble a vibrant, living tapestry. Situated in southwestern Colombia, the department is sculpted like a long, slender valley, cradled between the central and eastern cordilleras. At its heart flows the Magdalena River, the arterial force that organizes the landscape and sustains its productive pulse. From above, Huila—one of the most fertile lands in Colombia—reveals itself as a patchwork quilt of coffee, beans, rice, cocoa, plantains, tomatoes, tobacco, and corn; and of fruit trees such as tree tomato, lulo, blackberry, passion fruit, and dragon fruit. Yet, the dominant hue is the dense, dark green of coffee: its most common crop. Huila is also an export center. In 2025, with 2.5 million 60-kilo sacks harvested by 87,700 families[2], Huila was the country's leading coffee producer. Where the plantations end, the wilderness takes hold—a dramatic transition into rugged peaks, arid deserts, and high-altitude *páramos* (moorlands).

1. *Agronet – Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Huila: A Model of Agricultural Productive Development in Colombia, accessed December 26, 2025, https://www.agronet.gov.co/Noticias/Paginas/Huila%2C-modelo-de-desarrollo-productivo-agropecuario-en-Colombia.aspx.*

2. *Office of the Governor of Huila, We Celebrate the Positioning of Huila as the Leading Coffee Producer in the Country, based on data from the National Federation of Coffee Growers, 2025, accessed December 26, 2025, https://www.huila.gov.co/publicaciones/16455/celebramos-el-posicionamiento-del-huila-como-primer-productor-de-cafe-del-pais/.*

Its forests cover nearly 30 percent of the territory; its *páramos* and wetlands extend across another 5.9 percent. These ecosystems regulate, circulate, produce, and preserve water. They are also home to an enormous biological diversity: the Colombian Biodiversity Information System has recorded 7,819 species in Huila, nearly 10 percent of all those known in the country[3]. These forests and currents are pathways that allow migratory species to move between the Amazon, the Pacific coast, and the Andean region; they make it possible for life to reproduce, for seeds to travel, for nourishment to arrive, for ecological connectivity to be maintained, and for life to sustain itself time and again.

This territory bears witness to the very genesis of Colombia's armed conflict—a landscape etched with fragments that reveal both the origins of the war and the reasons for its enduring shadow. Beyond its natural beauty, Huila is a strategic "hinge" territory—a gateway to the southwest and the Amazon. Historically, its corridors provided escape and transit routes for guerrillas. It serves as a bridge between Caquetá and Cauca—two regions with a decades-long guerrilla presence—and connects with the Llanos del Yarí and La Macarena, the historical refuge of the FARC-EP.

The seeds of the armed conflict were sown here in the mid-20th century, peasants from Huila and Tolima organized themselves, hounded by violence and anti-communist persecution. In 1964, those roots would become the guerrilla group known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP). From that moment on, Huila would be a territory defined by their presence, control, and direct impact. In the 1970s, the region suffered the highest rate of kidnappings in the country, which was then one of the FARC-EP's financing methods. Between 1970 and 1978,

3. *Colombian Biodiversity Information System* (SIB), *accessed December 16, 2025,, https://cifras.biodiversidad.co/huila.*

one out of every five kidnappings committed by that guerrilla group occurred in Huila, according to data from the Truth Commission[4].

For years, paramilitarism remained on the sidelines of this territory, but in the early 2000s, it set its sights there. In 2002, the Calima Block of the AUC paramilitaries invaded the region to seize control of drug trafficking routes, leaving a trail of targeted killings, forced displacements, and massacres such as those in Pitalito and Suaza[5]. Around 2004, a paramilitary group known as the Conquistadores del Yarí also became active[6].

According to DANE (National Administrative Department of Statistics) projections for 2025, 1.2 million people live in Huila. Of these, 251,747 are registered as victims of the armed conflict[7]. That's one in five. It is a land that has wept "rivers of pain." In the Colombian Massif—a high-mountain territory made of páramos and lagoons—some of Colombia's most important tributaries are born: the Magdalena, Cauca, Caquetá, and Patía rivers. There is something about this land and its people that resembles the fertility of its soil: a persistent, stubborn capacity to thrive.

In this long history of violence, women have emerged as the cornerstone of resistance. Captain Adriana Lizet

4. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition, There is a Future if there is Truth. Territorial accounts of the armed conflict. Central Region, Colombia, accessed December 16, 2025, https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad.*

5. *National Center for Historical Memory, Calima Block of the AUC: Paramilitary Predation and Drug Trafficking in Southwestern Colombia, report from the Truth Agreements Directorate, Bogotá, 2017, https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/bloque-calima-auc.pdf.*

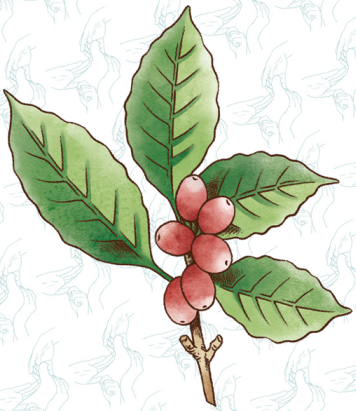
6. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition, Central Region Territorial Report, Colombia, 2022, 167.*

7. *Single Registry of Victims (RUV), accessed December 16, 2025, https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/.*

Quintero Camacho, of the Police Unit for Peacebuilding (UNIPEP), still carries the echoes of guerrilla incursions from her early childhood. She was born in Teruel, Huila, on July 13, 1990—at the peak of insurgent dominance—. Yet, amidst that persistent anxiety, she clings to a starkly different memory: the Police arriving at her school to organize recreational events, offering a fleeting sense of joy and a much-needed reprieve. Captivated by that spirit of community service, she chose the path of law enforcement. Through unwavering dedication, she rose to become a leader who bridges divides. Today, she walks alongside the signatories of the Peace Agreement —former FARC-EP combatants—as they navigate the complex journey of reintegrating into civilian life

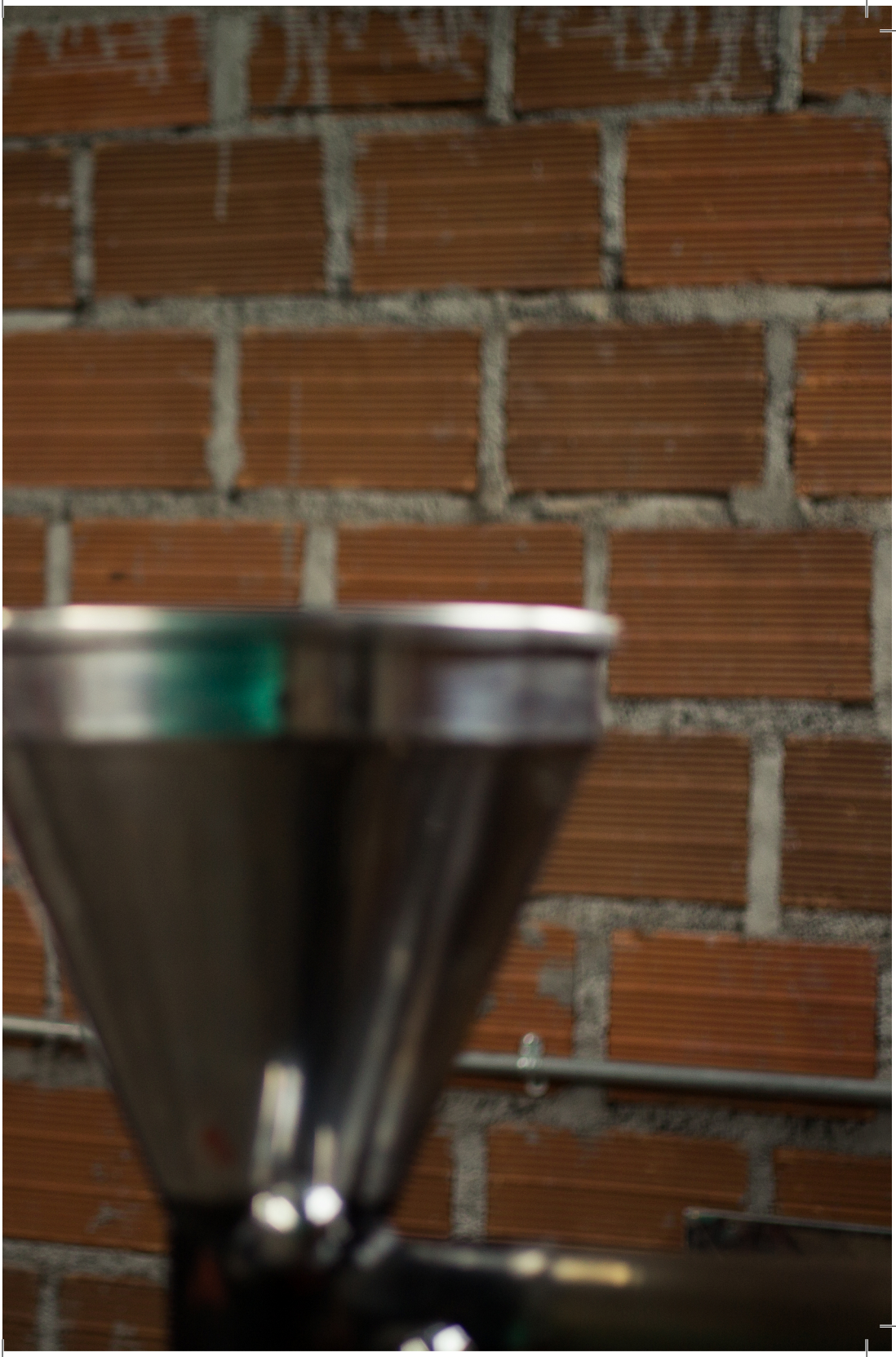
Adriana believes Huila has remained resilient because it is forged from "industrious, humble, and entrepreneurial people who are genuinely driven to move forward." Above all, she is struck by the fortitude of the women. She sees this strength in Erika Tatiana Pérez Gutiérrez and Malán Gutiérrez Cardoso—a daughter and mother who signed the Peace Agreement —with whom she has worked side-by-side in Algeciras to mend the social fabric. She finds it, too, in Marinella Prada Cortés, another leader from Algeciras whom Adriana speaks of with reverence. Marinella transformed her pain into music that heralds the hope of a new era, and into cacao that nourishes.

"The profound strength of the women in Algeciras is inextricably linked to the fact that they have endured the greatest suffering," observes Captain Quintero. These are women who have transmuted their personal grief into a collective vow: "We will not allow another woman to become a victim of this violence." That resilience—shared and unyielding—has become the very bedrock sustaining the peace.



Sustaining peace by signing agreements


Café
MUZ
¡El aroma que nos une!
Café
MUZ
¡El aroma que nos une!



The amber glow of Bogotá's Teatro Colón welcomed the guests: victims of the conflict, ambassadors, representatives of international organizations, judges, members of Congress, and members of the media. On stage, two rows of Colombian flags flanked a screen bathed in yellow, blue, and red. In the center, a small, unassuming wooden table held a thick document, a small pennant, and a white dove perched on top. Behind them, a group of people sat in wooden chairs, and in front, two men in dark suits wore nervous smiles. It was November 24, 2016.

The first to speak was then-President Juan Manuel Santos: "We all—absolutely all of us—know that peace will restore our hope, our faith in the future, and the possibility of a better life for ourselves and our children. This great common goal has eluded us, despite numerous attempts made over more than half a century. But Colombians are persistent." Later, Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, the top commander of the FARC-EP, addressed the gathering: "Our solidarity goes to all the victims of this long war, regardless of the side they belonged to, and our apology for any consequences they may have suffered at our hands.

Two months earlier, a plebiscite had been held to ratify the Peace Agreement reached between the government and the FARC-EP guerrillas. The "No" vote won by a narrow margin (51.8% voted "No" and 49.8% voted "Yes"), despite the fact



that the departments hardest hit by the violence, such as Chocó, Cauca, Putumayo, and Córdoba[1], voted in favor. The Agreement had to be revised and adjusted.

The new Agreement was signed at the Teatro Colón in a modest ceremony that reflected the uncertainty gripping the country. But something profound was changing in the history of Colombia. After four years of negotiations, 13,609 former FARC-EP combatants would lay down their weapons and commit to telling the truth about the war. A war they waged for more than fifty years, since in 1964 a group of armed peasants founded in Marquetalia, Tolima, what would become the longest-running guerrilla group in Latin America, in a context of extreme violence marked by conflicts over land and exclusion from the political system.

In that fleeting light, the life of Erika Tatiana Pérez Gutiérrez (born September 17, 1996) was on the verge of a radical transformation. Her chapter within the FARC-EP guerillas, where she had served since the age of 13, was closing; a grueling journey of reintegration and reclaiming her place within the community was just beginning. The first step was to "march" to the Pato-Balsillas Peasant Reserve Zone (ZRC) in Caquetá: "We were very worried, very anxious, because we didn't know what kind of life we were going to face," she recalls. Later, she moved to the ETCR (Territorial Training and Reintegration Area)[2] of Miravalle, a rural community in San Vicente del Caguán. There, she handed over her weapons and began the arduous task of rebuilding her life. "It was about three months while the disarmament process took place,

1. *National Civil Registry of Colombia, "Historical Electoral Results Viewer—2016 Plebiscite," Electoral Observatory (Accessed March 10, 2026).*

2. *The ETCRs (Territorial Training and Reintegration Spaces) are communities created by the Peace Agreement to support former combatants in their transition to civilian life. There, they develop productive projects, receive training, and participate in social processes.*



while the commitment agreements were drawn up, while they adjusted the legal issues for us, such as ID cards, health cards," she says. What followed was a relentless pursuit of education. Erika sought to validate in the halls of academia the empirical dental skills she had honed in the depths of the jungle while treating her fellow combatants. "My first priority was completing my high school equivalency: tenth and eleventh grades. From there, I moved to Bogotá to earn a technical degree in oral health. And in 2021, I finally enrolled in dental school," Erika shares from her home in the municipality of Algeciras, Huila. It's a Saturday, after an intense week of studying at the Antonio Nariño University in Neiva, where she is in her final semester of dentistry. Erika was born there at a time when confrontations between guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the Public Forces were beginning to intensify.

Algeciras is located in the eastern part of the department of Huila, nestled on the slopes of the Eastern Cordillera, in a strip that connects the Andes with the Amazon. It is a long, narrow territory: 672 square kilometers of interconnected mountains, cold peaks exceeding 3,400 meters, folds, slopes, and abundant water. It is also a strategic conservation area: the Cerro Páramo de Miraflores Regional Natural Park, the Siberia-Ceibas Regional Natural Park, and the Algeciras Municipal Natural Park protect water sources and high-mountain ecosystems such as the páramos and the high Andean Forest. This status as an environmental and geographical corridor, and its proximity to San Vicente del Caguán—which in the late 1990s was a "demilitarized zone" during a failed peace process—placed it at the heart of the conflict in southern Colombia. It was the scene of repeated armed takeovers by the FARC-EP, and for years its name was synonymous with violence.

And yet, the population remained organized and united. Algeciras was their life, their livelihood, their home. They had to stay. It is fertile land where, its inhabitants say, "the

only thing that doesn't grow is what isn't sown." From there emerge, primarily, beans, avocados, plantains, and bananas; also, coffee and cacao, which in recent years have gained recognition for their cooperative and sustainable practices. It is also a territory with a strong sense of community: its rural communities have solid community action boards, which have carefully built their own development and life plans. There are committees for women, youth, sports, and culture. Organization has been their way of rebuilding their communal life.

Reflecting on her years in the insurgency, Erika highlights her role as a teacher: "I spent my time assisting those who were illiterate, teaching reading comprehension and mathematics." She describes this pedagogical drive as an innate trait: "I am naturally inclined toward education; the desire to learn has always been my compass." True to this calling, after signing the peace agreement, she became the coordinator of an educational program called "Arando la Educación" (*Plowing Education*), which helped former combatants and their families complete their primary and secondary education.

For Erika, laying down arms also meant reuniting with her mother, Malán Gutiérrez Cardoso—herself a former combatant. "In my personal life, the signing of the Agreement meant a way to reconnect with many people: our families, our school friends, our neighbors. But that reunion had both positive and negative impacts," says Erika. When she speaks of the "positive" aspects, she mentions her new life with her mother in Algeciras. While they were both involved in the war (Erika in the jungle and Malán in downtown Algeciras), they went years without any contact.

One day, Malán received a message: "Word reached me that I could see her, though I scarcely dared to believe it. I packed a bag and set out with her younger brothers; we all went. Even her father, who no longer lived with me, joined

us. It was a true family reunion." They met again when the Peace Agreement was signed. "There was a gathering in Miravalle (Caquetá). So I went, I saw her, and I simply stayed with her... it was a moment of immense beauty." Though they separated briefly, Algeciras eventually acted as their gravity. Erika returned after a semester of dental school in Neiva to give birth to her daughter. "My mother insisted I come home so she could take care of me. Now, she is like a second mother to my baby. While I study, she steps in. My daughter even calls her 'Mom'," Erika says. They became a family once more.

Erika and Malán wanted to be part of their town's journey to peace; to accompany it in healing and rebuilding. But it wasn't easy, they insist. In 2023, Erika helped found the National Association of Reincorporated Persons of Algeciras, a collective of 33 peace signatories committed to transformative community action. "We develop grassroots initiatives without overshadowing individual livelihoods," Erika explains. "While each person has their own world—their small farm, their coffee crops, or their plantain groves—the organization is the heart of our collective development.".

In this process of organizing and becoming a collective, the Sustaining Peace (Sosteniendo la Paz) initiative provided a definitive boost. 'For the first time,' she says, 'we, the signatories of the Peace Agreement, were taken into account to develop a project.

Supported by the IOM (International Organization for Migration), KOICA, and the ARN, the group established a formal office and mastered the technical intricacies of project management and public policy. "We didn't want just any office. We wanted a space for reconciliation—a place to voice needs and co-create solutions," she says. The road was long. They set their sights on a municipal building that had been occupied irregularly for years and was considered inaccessible. Many organizations tried to use it without success. Through patient



negotiation, the Mayor's office granted them the second floor, which the signatories meticulously refurbished. Today, the office is managed by the Foundational Association of Reincorporated Persons of Algeciras (Asofunreal). "This place has allowed us to build the trust necessary for people to want to coordinate with us."

Their purpose is to work on community projects that benefit many. By late 2025, the association secured a grant that embodies their ultimate mission: helping fellow signatories who still live in the shadows of stigmatization and fear to return to their territories and tell their truths. The idea is to start with concrete actions: identify a need—painting a school, for example—discuss it, agree on it collectively, and train community members to make it a reality together. The office has evolved into a vital crossroads. Conversations with State institutions such as the Police and the Army began there. The Mayor's office and social organizations also arrived. They introduced themselves. They called on others to envision a different shared future. They are also very close to women's organizations. They are currently working on creating a political advocacy school for them.

Malán was driven by a profound desire to make amends—not in isolation, but through collective healing. She joined forces with fellow women signatories and local leaders to establish the Asociación Café Mujeres Mixtas Unidas por la Paz (Cafémuz), the only organization of women signatories in the territory. More than just a roasting facility where local beans are processed, ground, and packaged, Cafémuz serves as a transformative educational hub where they encourage them to consume their own coffee, to transform it so that its value increases. Beyond the technicalities of coffee, Cafémuz has become a sanctuary for dialogue—a space to dissect the unique challenges women face and to conceive bold new initiatives. It is a center for political advocacy anchored by coffee, which they consider their "great life's ambition."

Malán and her companions harbor a shared vision: the creation of a formal school for women of peace. “We have already started doing outreach in schools, talking about the peace process, because many children don’t know about it. “My dream,” Malán explains, “is for them to truly understand our journey, so they are not burdened by the same stigma that follows us today.”

Malán recalls a woman at a community gathering who initially refused to even share a room with her. After repeatedly crossing paths in various peace-building circles, the woman eventually spoke with startling candor: ““We have lacked preparation, we have lacked education to be able to be in these spaces without being consumed by resentment.”

Because of this, Malán insists that education is essential for sustaining peace. Both she and Erika agree that the Peace Agreement should have included spaces and processes for healing—both for those who signed the agreement and for the community. “We understand the victim population,” Erika notes with empathy. “Their pain and resentment are valid; this municipality was decimated by the conflict.” The Truth Commission’s Final Report supports this, identifying stigmatization as a primary driver of the conflict’s persistence in Colombia. It describes stigma as a “mechanism for constructing an enemy,” a psychological tool used to justify violence against fellow citizens.

Captain Adriana Quintero, who has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Erika, Malán, and other women signatories to reclaim community life, admits that peering into their stories was a transformative experience. “You begin to humanize them,” she confesses. “You realize you didn’t truly know their origins or the circumstances that led them to the ranks. At first, there was a palpable barrier on both sides—these were the very people we once faced in combat—but now, we are

allies on the same side of history. Changing that mentality requires a profound openness."

For Malán, education is the first cure for stigmatization. "I will not rest," she declares, "until Algeciras is liberated from the resentment that still lingers." In this quest, she is not alone: beside her stands a resilient coalition of women—peace signatories, members of the Public Forces, and civil society leaders—who share the same dream.



Sustaining peace through song and sowing





She carries a name chosen by her father, Gabriel Prada, in homage to a celebrated artist of the last century: Marinella (born September 15, 1974). He bestowed the name Marlene upon her younger sister following the same artistic whim. Gabriel, a peasant from Tolima with an insatiable passion for music, hoped that by naming them so, his daughters would inherit the same fire that ignited within him whenever he gripped a microphone and a guitar. ""He used to say he hoped his children would love music, because music cultivates sensitive souls," recalls Marinella, now a prominent leader of multiple social causes in Algeciras, Huila.

In a cherished recording preserved by her father, a three-year-old Marinella sings *música campesina*—the rustic melodies she absorbed from Gabriel's voice and hands. She mastered the *guacharaca*, and by age nine, she was a regular on the competition circuit. Eventually, she and her father formed "Marinella and her Imperial Trio," gracing the stages of Colombia's most prestigious folk festivals: the Mono Núñez in Valle del Cauca, the Colono de Oro in Caquetá, and the Festival de la Parranda in Roldanillo, Valle del Cauca.

"My social awakening began in childhood, through the medium of music. It allowed me to encounter diverse places, many realities, and a multitude of people," she reflects. "Today, she is part of collectives and associations of peacebuilders, cocoa farmers, and women. This last cause—the defense of

women's rights and lives— is the heartbeat of her current work and deeply permeates her lyrics. "I am a woman; I am neither slave nor queen. I understand my role with a clear conscience. I am no longer your 'inferior sex'; I hold the same rights as you. From the strength of my wholeness, my soul sings to you..." she recites from one of her compositions. This fierce awareness crystallized following the darkest chapter of her life: the death of her sister

Marinella arrived in Algeciras at thirteen. Her parents, Leonor and Gabriel, had fled their previous home in Aipe— another town in the same department— driven out by the relentless tide of violence. In Algeciras, the coffee trade offered them a foothold—a second chance at stability. But this same territory would eventually become the setting for their deepest grief.

On November 27, 2002, the life of the Prada Cortés family was irrevocably shattered. They owned a *cacharrería* (variety store) where they sold food, toiletries, and what Marinella calls "knick-knacks." Her younger sister, Marlene, managed the business. As the two sisters walked toward the shop that day, a sudden, thunderous eruption of violence plunged their world into a void. Seven bullets struck twenty-three-year-old Marlene and her six-year-old son. Marinella, who was pregnant at the time, was shot in the left leg. "It was an agonizing moment. I arrived at the hospital with my leg lacerated—my tibia and fibula shattered—while carrying an unborn child and caring for my other children, who were only seven, five, and three," she recounts. Marlene died instantly. "We never discovered the motive, nor did we dare to ask, for fear of inviting further tragedy... In those days, the killing of women was rampant," Marinella explains. She recalls how they lived under a veil of permanent suspicion, simply for practicing the impartial hospitality required of shopkeepers. "All kinds of people frequented our business... We served

everyone who came to purchase their small necessities." "Years later, Marinella says, a former member of the guerrilla publicly acknowledged the group's responsibility for the death of Marlene and other women from Algeciras who were unjustly branded as collaborators with the opposing side

In its Final Report, the Truth Commission asserts that women were among the demographics most severely ravaged by the conflict. They—alongside individuals of diverse sexual and gender identities—endured specific, disproportionate atrocities merely for the "crime" of being who they were. The report further delineates the relentless cycles of violence that ensnare them. In the chapter titled "*My Body is the Truth*" (*Mi cuerpo es la verdad*), it is revealed that for women, violence is rarely a singular event; rather, it is a precursor to a series of subsequent violations. On average, women interviewed by the Commission reported between two and three distinct infringements of their fundamental rights. Nothing is isolated. Violence, the report concludes, is an interconnected web: originating in childhood and spiraling through the family, the community, and ultimately, the war itself[1].

Armed factions sought to dominate, violate, and dismantle women's bodies, freedoms, and dignity as a strategic means of territorial control. By shredding the social fabric, they aimed to seize absolute power—often at the cost of life itself. Yet, as the Commission notes, women have remained the indispensable architects of reconstruction in a society long submerged in conflict: "They have refused to surrender, demonstrating a singular capacity to rebuild social life against all odds. These women leaders and organizations have shattered the vicious cycle of violence. In the shadow of death and destruction, they have issued a resounding "no" to war,

1. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition. (2022). There is a Future if there is Truth: Final Report (p. 18). Truth Commission. Available at https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad*



championing a peaceful resistance and a collective defense of human dignity"[2].

For a long time, Marinella's voice went silent. The voice that once belted out "Colombia of my loves" and "Colombian Peasant"—a waltz and a merengue composed by her father—had been stifled by the suffocating weight of grief. Yet, during those years of silence, her perspective shifted. She began to comprehend the true magnitude of the scar the war had left upon her town. "I allowed myself the opportunity to inhabit the pain of others," she reflects

One day, she was invited to visit the Association of Women Victims Building Peace and Development of Algeciras (Amudelhuila). Drawn by the promise of singing therapy and psychological support, she attended a session that would change her life. It was there she realized she was harboring a reservoir of "repressed pain." Since the day her world fractured, Marinella had stifled her tears to shield her children from her suffering. In that hollow silence, her anguish had settled into the mundane, becoming a permanent weight she carried without reprieve.

The day she stepped into the association, the need for concealment vanished. Witnessing the vulnerability of others granted her the permission to speak her own truth. She spoke, she wept, she sang—and in doing so, she began to mend.

"I realized I wasn't alone; that my family's tragedy was a shared one," Marinella says. "I met formidable, powerful women who possessed a profound capacity for listening. I also recognized an urgent need to educate ourselves on our rights and responsibilities. I began to wonder what more

2. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition. (2022). There is a Future if there is Truth: Final Report (p. 13). Truth Commission. Available at https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad*


ALGECIRAS ACTIVA Y RESILIENTE
Festival por la vida y la paz
ALGECIRAS - HUILA

could be done for those around us, as the war was far from over. That was the moment I discovered social music."

Marinella turned music into her language to say everything she had kept inside—to imagine a different destiny for her family, her town, and her country. "Today, I sing music with messages about the need to resist, to remain united, and to continue as a community."

She became acquainted with other associations for victims and women; she attended assemblies with a keen ear and a resolute mind. She dedicated herself to the study of human rights, with a fierce focus on those safeguarding the lives of women. Soon, she emerged as a vanguard for every cause seeking a life of dignity—one emancipated from the shadow of violence. In the countless gatherings she navigated, the concept of a "Women's House" was a recurring vision shared by all. Now, through the Sosteniendo la Paz initiative, that dream is nearing fruition: they are on the cusp of transforming a granted space into a multifunctional center for training, psychological sanctuary, and mutual care.

Over the years—driven by relentless industry and an inexhaustible curiosity to decode her country's complex history—Marinella rose to become the coordinator of the Municipal Desk for the Effective Participation of Victims. From this vital platform, she is championing a cause long yearned for by the people of Algeciras: the formal recognition of the municipality as a victim of "collective damage" stemming from the armed conflict.

With the support of the IOM, KOICA, and the ARN—and guided by a specialist in historical memory—the community began the arduous task of reconstructing their narrative to fully grasp the scope of the war's devastation. Through this process, they came to understand that seeking recognition as a "Subject of Collective Reparation"—an official designation for groups that have suffered shared, communal harm—is a path already being pursued by two specific groups of victims.

The first group seeks justice for the tragedy known as "the little patrollers" (los patrulleritos). According to the National Center for Historical Memory, on November 12, 1990, during a holiday Monday, a cycling caravan near the rural district of Piedra Sucia was ambushed by the FARC-EP's Second Front. Traveling in an unmarked police vehicle were children from a civilian youth police program. A dynamite blast hurled the truck from the road, followed by a merciless barrage of gunfire. Six children, aged nine to fourteen, were killed. To ensure their memory remains indelible, their faces were painted onto the cross of the high altar in the Algeciras church—a permanent vigil in the heart of the community.

The second group seeks redress for the assault of June 26, 2000. According to research by the National Center for Historical Memory, on that day, the FARC-EP's 13th Teófilo Forero Front laid siege to the urban heart of Algeciras with rockets and mortars. The police station and the church were reduced to ash and rubble; the Mayor's office, the Agricultural Bank, and numerous homes bore the scars of that hollow Monday within their fractured walls. For months, the ruins sat in the central plaza as a grim reminder of the carnage. "Our main park has hosted many Sampedrina festivals and shared joys," Marinella explains, "but it has also looked war directly in the eye. The police station sits right on that corner, a constant witness to what we have endured."

The preservation of memory has become a constant, living exercise in Algeciras. Through the Sosteniendo la Paz initiative, the community received the tools to systematically classify and curate the archives of the Museum of Memory and Peace—a sanctuary housed within the local House of Culture. "Previously, we lacked a cohesive methodology to articulate the significance of these objects or the identities of the people they represent," Marinella explains. "We soon realized that technical rigor and organizational structure were indispensable to telling our story with the depth it deserved.".

For Marinella, true leadership demanded a radical step: working alongside the peace signatories. These were individuals driven by a profound desire to restore to Algeciras what the conflict had stripped away: tranquility, social cohesion, and the fragile bond of trust. In a landmark collaboration involving the signatories, the National Police, the Army, and various advocacy groups, they inaugurated the Festival for Life and Peace. For Marinella, this festival is her crowning achievement—a space where the pulse of communal life was finally restored. "Following the agreements, Algeciras existed within a 'peace bubble,' a fragile state of transition," she reflects. "I chose to engage in social work with the signatories, though I never anticipated it would be easy to share a room with those who had inflicted such deep wounds upon our own town. Yet, in that shared space, I began to perceive them as human beings—as parents, as siblings. When you truly listen to their stories, the realization is stark: the war has fractured us all, without exception.".

This, Marinella insists, is the ongoing pilgrimage Algeciras must undertake to achieve true communal peace. "Algeciras has shown immense kindness and resilience by opening its gates to the signatories," she says. "But we have reached a juncture that requires a moment of profound forgiveness." While the Truth Commission posits that forgiveness is an intimate, individual act—distinct from the legal frameworks of reparation and justice—Marinella believes the community requires more "spaces of reflection." She envisions conscious, intentional encounters where forgiveness might take root. Above all, she seeks a path toward reconciliation—the renewed ability to coexist in a shared landscape. "I am under no illusions; I know it is a grueling path," she admits. "It is not easy. But it is certainly not impossible.".





Scan the code to hear
Marinella's performance

“This nation possesses the soul-stirring richness of its people, a vast tapestry of cultural expressions, the profound depth of its spiritual traditions, and an unwavering work ethic and entrepreneurial drive to create the conditions for the life its people long for”

Truth Commission of Colombia, Call for a Great Peace, Final Report.

Chapter 3

Tolima



The wax palms of Tolima are more than a landmark; they are a testament to endurance. They have stood tall through decades of deforestation, fire, and the storms of violence. The people of Tolima have inherited this same quiet defiance—a silent, rooted will to keep building toward a brighter future, even when the wind blows hardest against them.

In the heart of the Central Cordillera sits a "Mother Mountain." Reaching 5,276 meters toward the sky, the Nevado del Tolima is an ancient, conical giant born more than a million years ago. It has a volcanic crater about 180 meters in diameter and a white peak that has been steadily disappearing. For the Pijao indigenous people, it held sacred value; they called it Dulima, "river of snow," when the snow still covered it abundantly, constantly feeding the rivers that flow into the valleys. Since the mid-19th century, Colombia has lost 91 percent of its ice cover. The snow-covered peak of Tolima has shrunk from 8.6 to a mere 0.45 square kilometers[1]. This is how the planet's environmental imbalance manifests itself, jeopardizing access to water, climate regulation, and also the culture of a people.

From the Nevado del Tolima volcano, this department unfolds between two mountain ranges—the Central and the Eastern—that contain it and connect it to the rest of the country. This territory of 23,562 square kilometers, inhabited by 1.3 million people, stretches across high-altitude plains, valleys, and remote forests that have been a cradle of life and also of suffering. Being the link between the center of the

1. *Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies* (IDEAM), "*Nevado del Tolima*," *Ecosystems and Environmental Information Section—Glaciers*, *accessed January 19, 2026, https://www.ideam.gov.co/nuestra-entidad/ecosistemas-e-informacion-ambiental/glaciares/nevado-del-tolima.*

country and the southwest provided it with the conditions to accumulate stories of settlements and dispossession, of fierce disputes and losses, of resilience. At the center of it all remains the land itself.

The Truth Commission reconstructed this history of colonization. The first inhabitants descended from peoples such as the Ambigües, Quimbayas, and Pijaos. They arrived by traveling up the Magdalena River, the same river that the Spanish later used to invade and enslave these communities; the Pijaos resisted tenaciously. The 20th century brought coffee colonization and the encounter between Indigenous groups and settlers from Antioquia, Boyacá, Cundinamarca, Cauca, and Nariño. The Antioquians spread coffee cultivation southward, giving rise to the hacienda system, which accumulated wealth and exploited labor. By 1920, these systemic tensions sparked the nation's first major mobilizations for land rights[2].

The 1950s arrived with "La Violencia" (The Violence)—the bloody partisan war between Liberals and Conservatives. From this chaos emerged the first Liberal and Communist self-defense groups. These were the seeds of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP), founded in 1964 in the village of Marquetalia (Gaitania district, municipality of Planadas, southern Tolima): the guerrilla group that would refuse to lay down its arms for sixty years and would never truly leave the mountains of Tolima.

Then came the April 19 Movement (M-19) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). And in the 1980s, during the rise of drug trafficking and poppy cultivation, paramilitarism took root, with the Rojo Atá group providing "assassination

2. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, There is a future if there is truth. Territorial accounts of the armed conflict. Central Region, Colombia, p. 41, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad.*

services, land security, and private security" to the cartels[3]. The 1990s saw the advance of paramilitaries and the creation of the Tolima Bloc of the AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia). Not a day went by without new victims. The Single Registry of Victims recognizes 363,376 people in Tolima. Ninety-two percent were internally displaced[4].

Peace is also rooted in Tolima. There, in 1996, the region's first peace agreement, led by an ethnic community, was signed. The Nasa We'sx Indigenous Reserve of Gaitania and the FARC-EP guerrillas made a pact to protect the lives of the civilian population and their territory amidst an increasingly hostile war. The initiative originated with the Nasa people. They sent a letter to the regional commander proposing dialogue. This marked the beginning of one of the country's most significant acts of civil resistance against the war. The agreement reduced violence, stemmed displacement, transformed community life, and strengthened self-governance and autonomy. As violence receded, the land became fertile once more, and coffee began to flourish on the mountainsides. It was more than a local agreement; it was a seed of hope for all of Colombia, proving that dialogue could lead a community out of the labyrinth of war5.

About 60 kilometers from Gaitania lies Chaparral, the largest of Tolima's 47 municipalities, covering 2,124 square kilometers. It holds a place in the national consciousness

3. *Analysis Unit "Following the Conflict", Dynamics of the armed conflict in Tolima and its humanitarian impact, Bulletin # 62, Ideas for Peace Foundation (FIP), Bogotá, July 2013, p. 7, https://storage.ideaspaz.org/documents/5b4f7483ae722.pdf*

4. *Single Registry of Victims (RUV), platform with official data on victims of the armed conflict in Colombia, accessed January 19, 2016, https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/.*

5. *Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, There is a future if there is truth. Territorial accounts of the armed conflict. Central Region, Colombia, p. 161, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad.*

as the birthplace of three presidents of the Republic: José María Melo, Manuel Murillo Toro, and Darío Echandía. Chaparral incorporates these three names into its identity. This is evident in a plaza in its historic center, which could be considered large compared to municipalities of similar size. There, their busts are displayed with the same prominence as those of the heroes of Independence in other plazas.

And in between, lies Tolima's abundant land: Andean forests, páramos (high-altitude moorlands), tropical dry forest, high-altitude wetlands, riparian forests, and lowland rainforests. To protect these fragile ecosystems, 72 protected areas have been established, including three National Natural Parks. Rivers originate in these areas, and they are home to species found nowhere else on Earth.

According to the Colombia Biodiversity Information System, the department is home to 8,803 recorded species—accounting for 11% of the country's total biodiversity—including 697 endemic species[6] that exist only within these borders.

Among the plant species, a single-stemmed tree stands out, reaching between 20 and 60 meters in height, which takes decades to reproduce: the wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuense*), Colombia's national tree. Its largest population is in Tolima: more than one million.

Wax palms are survivors, they have stood defiant through decades of deforestation, scorched earth, and the crossfire of war. It is as if the people of Tolima have inherited their rooted persistence. This same quiet strength lives in María Ximena Figueroa Olaya, a Pijao leader who uses ancestral wisdom to shield the women and LGBTIQ+ communities of Chaparral—groups the war tried to erase, but who emerged

6. *Colombia Biodiversity Information System* (SIB), *biodiversity profile of the department of Tolima, accessed January 19, 2026, https://cifras.biodiversidad.co/tolima.*

with a voice more powerful than ever. It lives in María Esilda Ramírez Gómez, who found in the rhythmic clack of the loom in Herrera, Rioblanco, the voice that decades of conflict had denied her and many other peasant women. They have been patient and persistent like those million palms.



Sustaining peace with indigenous knowledge





The enormous patio of her maternal grandparents' house—Margarita Sogamoso and Marciano Olaya, Pijao Indigenous people—in Ortega (Tolima), resembled a vibrant painting of browns, yellows, oranges, purples, greens, and all the colors that medicinal plants can produce. María Ximena Figueroa Olaya (May 25, 1979), an Indigenous leader of the Pijao people of Tolima, grew up there amidst the scents and mysticism of spearmint, chamomile, anise, lemon balm, and valerian. With patience, while accompanying his grandparents to tend the garden or prepare a drink, she learned to recognize them, to name them, to attribute properties to them.

"My maternal grandmother taught us, from a spiritual perspective, how to cultivate tobacco, how to plant it, how to harvest the leaves," she recounts. "Around the tobacco plants and the house was the medicinal garden. She taught us about sweet and bitter medicinal herbs. Because they lived by the Cucuana River, she taught us to listen to the water." It was also common for her grandmother to take her by the hand to community meetings and gatherings, along with her twin sister, María del Pilar.

During vacations, they would visit their paternal grandparents—Rosa María Ángel Yanguma and Florencio Figueroa Méndez—in the Matora de Maito Indigenous community in Chaparral, in southern Tolima. There, they



would accompany their grandmother to the community meetings called to organize themselves, to discuss their rights, to identify their needs, and to agree on how to proceed. In Ortega, where they spent their early childhood, their mother and father did the same: they would bring the girls to the community meetings. She quickly recognized the power of the collective.

The Indigenous communities of southern Tolima, in turn, watched her grow up in meetings and began to notice a special drive in her. They delegated tasks to her, such as taking notes, writing minutes, and organizing files; later, they started asking her to be their spokesperson at regional meetings; then she became secretary and national spokesperson for her people.

"That drive to cooperate without expecting anything in return—that has been my compass since I was small," she says. She then recounts that, during those visits to her maternal grandmother's farm, where her cousins also went, the food was served as the Pijao culture teaches ancestrally: dry portions of cob, meat, yucca, and squash were served in a large wooden trough, while soups, sancocho, colada, and mazamorra were poured into gourds. Sitting by the hearth, María Ximena learned the true meaning of the word *sharing*. "Knowledge is born in the kitchen," she explains. "There, you learn to interpret the fire. My grandmother didn't just feed us; she fed our understanding of what it means to be Pijao."

María Ximena belongs to many places, though her umbilical cord and placenta are buried in Bogotá. Her mother, pregnant with twins, traveled there to have a cesarean section. She spent the first years of her childhood in Ortega, in rural houses her parents looked after. There, in the quiet nights of the mountains, she learned the sounds of war and fear. "We were little girls, and motorcycles would drive past the house where we lived. Those motorcycles are really loud, really loud. They would pass by at midnight. My mom said we couldn't



make any noise. They would yell awful things, swear… The next day, at dawn, around 5:30, when it was already between light and dark, the neighbors would come and say, 'Hey, they killed the neighbor over there and threw him in the river.' Or, 'They disappeared an entire family.'"

The fear turned to despair when they heard helicopters flying low. When bullets from all sides flew from hill to hill. "When that happened, my mom would put a white sheet over the antenna, a large, satiny piece of white fabric, so they could see that there were houses, that people lived there," says María Ximena. Those scenes come back frequently. The fear, too. "You say the war is over," María Ximena reflects, "but it stays in your body. The instinct to hide, the fear of going out—those things linger."

In 1995, the war became personal. The family's beloved uncle Sebastián was murdered, and soon after, a new shadow loomed: the FARC-EP. The guerrilla group, notorious for the recruitment of minors, began to circle the twins. To save them, the family fled to Chaparral, seeking refuge with their paternal grandparents and a chance to start over.

By 2001, at just 22 years old, María Ximena made history as the first young Indigenous woman to govern the Matora de Maito community. She had begun studying accounting. A year earlier, she had been chosen as Young Person of the Year for her advocacy for women. By then, she had already seen a great deal traveling through the rural communities of Chaparral, listening to the women who had little contact with the outside world, who were hearing for the first time about human rights, gender-based violence, and political participation. María Ximena was determined to understand and fight against male chauvinist violence. At the same time, she witnessed the worst years of violence that the armed conflict sowed in Chaparral. She saw how women and the





LGBTIQ+ population suffered the cruelest and most profound impacts.

The history of Chaparral is marked by a long history of violence. The National Center for Historical Memory explains that rural communities like El Limón, Irco, and Chicalá became the first centers of communist resistance in the 1950s[1], driven by persecution from the government and conservatives. A decade later, the FARC-EP guerrillas took root in these mountains and used areas like the Cañón de las Hermosas (Beautiful Canyon) to move around, resupply, and control everything. Ten years after that, the paramilitaries arrived with temporary and brutal incursions to sow fleeting terror. They used targeted killings of LGBTQ+ individuals, the homeless, drug users, and sex workers as messages to "correct" and "cleanse" the community; to impose their "heterosexual and virile" authority"[2].

In Chaparral, the war seeped into the bodies and diverse identities of its people. According to the Truth Commission, the first forced displacement of a trans woman was documented in 1991, followed by systematic persecution: guerrillas would shave the heads of trans women before forcing them to leave, almost always heading to Bogotá[3].

Since 1999, some responded with beauty pageants in the streets, occupying the public space from which they were being erased. One of the best-known was the Tuluní River Trans Pageant, which originated as a picnic in 2000. Over time, it became a strategy of political and cultural resistance

1. *National Center for Historical Memory, From the Precursor Groups to the Tolima Bloc (AUC), Report No. 1, Bogotá, 2017, p. 46.*

2. *National Center for Historical Memory (2018), A Carnival of Resistance: Memories of the Trans Reign of the Tuluní River, Bogotá, CNMH, p. 100*

3. *Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Repetition Commission, There Is a Future If There Is Truth: Territorial Accounts of the Armed Conflict. Central Region, Colombia, p. 158, accessed January 15, 2025, https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad.*

that challenged social prejudices and the moral order imposed by armed groups. In the words of the National Center for Historical Memory, trans women and gay men appropriated a space of freedom to "demand visibility, rights, and equality from the world"[4]. They did so with art and beauty. But the celebration was silenced with threats, pamphlets, and trans femicides.

The carnival was forced into the shadows, and for years, its story—and the stories of those who lived it—remained a whispered secret, because the violence didn't stop. Against this silence, against the oblivion, and against the historical discrimination and violations suffered by this population, social organizations, with the support of ART, IOM, and KOICA, carried out awareness and training programs in rural schools. They went to talk about topics that are not discussed in the community: gender and sexual diversity, identity, and freedom. They insisted that there is not just one way to feel and inhabit the body, and they reiterated that none of these ways can be punished. This entire narrative is also marked by stigmatization and state repression because it involves a town with a long history of war. They wanted to control it because it was vast and difficult to encompass—it is the largest municipality in Tolima, with 2,124 square kilometers and an estimated population of 55,128—and because its location made it a key area.

By the turn of the century, María Ximena had emerged as a leader of formidable character. While the war reached its most devastating peak, she was busy protecting the most vulnerable. She trained at a leadership school run by the Tolima government and began to meet other women who, like her, were willing to speak out against injustices and mobilize to find solutions. She remembers, for example, the

4. *National Center for Historical Memory* (2018), A *Carnival of Resistance: Memories of the Trans Reign of the Tuluní River*, Bogotá, CNMH, p. 192



time several rural communities were cut off after a downpour swept away chunks of the mountainside, blocking the roads. "We went with a group of women to speak with the mayor, but they didn't even listen to us. So, we said, 'We'll have to come with a lot of women to get their attention.' And we went," she recounts.

That experience also convinced them that they needed to form peasant and women's social organizations, which would serve as a platform for their struggle. They joined together and created collectives. Then, they combined the strength of these groups and by 2004 had formally created something larger and more powerful: the Chaparral Women's Network for Peace.

"Before, peasant women didn't come to town," María Ximena explains. "They were always there, in the countryside. They also didn't go out because of the conflict. They weren't educated; many women didn't know how a mayor's office or the government worked. We said that we had to replicate what we learned at the leadership school. So, we would say, 'Let's go to this village, and this one, and this one.' And the women would wait for us." At the same time, she was the mother of Álvaro, whom she had at 26. And she didn't give up on her dream of studying. Years later, she would become an international business administrator from the University of Tolima and pursue a master's degree in peacebuilding.

When they arrived in the rural communities, they would invite the women to talk "around the hearth in the traditional huts," as María Ximena[5] describes those gatherings where they discussed human rights, gender-based violence, autonomy, and leadership. María Ximena insisted that education is the only way to overcome machismo, that historical violence that

5. *Figueroa, Ximena, undergraduate thesis, National University of Colombia, 2009, accessed January 16, 2026, https://www.bivipas.unal.edu.co/jspui/bitstream/10720/289/6/D-322-Figueroa_Ximena-2009-113.pdf.*

haunted them. "Women are discriminated against, and their capacity for decision-making and leadership in organizational spaces is questioned," María Ximena[6] wrote in a text for the Universidad Nacional (University).

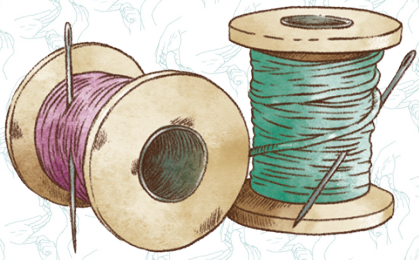
"Sustaining Peace" supported this idea. They traveled through 12 Indigenous communities in Chaparral, gathering, talking, listening, and sharing knowledge so that rural women could learn about their inalienable rights and defend them. "We held several talking circles with women from Indigenous communities to understand their collective rights, their rights as women, and their rights as Indigenous women." They met to talk about territory, autonomy, and self-determination. They explored the role of women in the continuity of their communities. They came together through ritual and spirituality.

The talking circles begin with a harmonization, a ritual to open a collective space. A group of women draws a spiral or a circular figure on the ground using plants, grains, flowers, water and fire. The space is cleansed with plants, the women are invited to circle the figure, and they are asked to state their intentions for participating.

"We use a whole range of medicinal plants to reaffirm our first territory: the women's body," María Ximena says. "We prepare baths with bitter plants like rue and mugwort, and sweet plants like basil, chamomile, mint, pennyroyal, and abrecaminos (a type of herb). They are macerated and prepared. As the steam rises, cleansing the aura and the skin, the silence finally breaks." And then, the words begin to flow.

6. *Figueroa, Ximena, undergraduate thesis, National University of Colombia, 2009, accessed January 16, 2026,, https://www.bivipas.unal.edu.co/jspui/bitstream/10720/289/6/D-322-Figueroa_Ximena-2009-113.pdf.*





Sustaining peace through weaving





A row of small embroideries hangs on a column. The first: an orange and red house under a clear blue sky. In the corner, a rainbow. Below, a field thick with yellow, purple, and pink flowers. And a path. "This was my mother's house, where she delivered babies and ran errands with her medicinal plants," says María Esilda Ramírez Gómez (February 3, 1963), a leader from southern Tolima, pointing to the embroidery held by a wooden frame. She continues: "There are the calendulas, the dahlia flowers, the cilantro, the onions, everything the garden produced. This little path comes from the street… My mother was a leader in the family and in the community; she knew a lot about botany."

The piece, about ten centimeters in size, was made by Yenny Edelmira Mendieta, an embroiderer and one of her three daughters. Another daughter, Sandra Lisbed, weaves macramé: she creates figures by braiding threads and forming knots, instead of using a needle. The third daughter, Diana Marcela, is a coffee farmer. It's a Friday in November 2025. At the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation in Bogotá, the exhibition "A Journey to the Pluriverse of Peace" opens, bringing together the textiles of women from southern Tolima. In 2013, María Esilda founded Asomeht—the Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Herrera, Tolima—along with her daughters, nieces, and neighbors.



Even in the high, remote mountains of Herrera—a village in Rioblanco, in southern Tolima, where María Esilda is from—the cold isn't as penetrating and dry as in Bogotá. For this opening day, María Esilda has dressed with care—wool stockings beneath an elegant pink dress and a black coat. She's excited. On the walls of the country's primary memory museum, the weavings that she and the women of southern Tolima have created for years are exhibited as if they were a diary. María Esilda was a teacher to many of them; she passed down the knowledge inherited from her grandmothers, her mother, and her aunts, and transformed the weaving circles into spaces for mourning and celebration, memory and denunciation, and activism."

If the door of the orange-threaded house where she teaches embroidery were to open, there would be her mother, Elvira Gómez, by the hearth, surrounded by women and her 14 children. She was a midwife, herbalist, healer, counselor, and seamstress. "She had a medicinal garden and would send the herbs so people could heal. She helped women a lot, especially those in the countryside, who suffer a great deal," says María Esilda.

If one could look through the black and white thread windows, perhaps one would see María Esilda as a child, attentive to her mother, carefully listening to the intimate conversations the women confided in her and learning about the properties of plants. Later, one might see the teenager and the young woman, with a needle and thread, following the instructions given in class by the Laurita nuns at her school. María Esilda grew up watching her mother be a leader day and night: helping, giving. And one day she was there, doing the same: working for the rights of women and rural people. But that would be many years later, when she was already a mother of three daughters and had gone through a separation from her partner. Seeking to survive, almost without realizing

it, she began to join collectives: parent-teacher associations, community organizations, women's groups.

"I started working on the women's affairs committee for a government program for forest ranger families, and I began to notice a lot of violence against women," she recounts. "I remembered my mother's voice: *women have to work so they don't have to ask their husbands for everything*. She taught us to be independent, so we wouldn't have to endure mistreatment just to survive."

With that in mind, she began to carve out a space for herself in her community. She served several terms as secretary of the Community Action Board in her village. At the same time, to earn some money, she started teaching embroidery classes. And while she gave instructions on how to thread the needle, she would bring up topics such as human rights, women's rights, gender-based violence, and economic autonomy.

Further down, on the same wall of the Memory Center, stands a leafy tree adorned with multiple shades of green and brown. To the right, at the base of its trunk, lies a flower garden. To the left, a white house rests in its shade. "This tree stands in the center of our district and is now we call it the Tree of Life. But it didn't always have that name. It used to be called the opposite—the Tree of Death. It has seen and felt every tragedy that ever crossed our path," says Sandra Lisbed, María Esilda's daughter.

"It's a saman tree. The first settlers who arrived from the Cauca Valley brought it and planted it there, on the road to Planadas. I think it might be over 90 years old," she explains. Next to the saman tree, there is a plaque with a quote from María Esilda: "A silent witness to the harshness of conflict in Herrera. But we, like the plants, cling to the earth that sustains and nourishes us, so that we may be resilient and give life, shade, and protection."

In the white-painted house next to the tree lived a woman who gained a reputation as a gossip for keeping tabs on who came and went from the nearby bars. This "tolerance zone," explains María Esilda, is the work of settlers from Antioquia, the Old Caldas region, Huila, and Cauca, who founded the hamlet in 1931. "The first thing they established was the tolerance zone," she recounts. "They brought women from the Valle del Cauca, set up their own bar, and made them their girlfriends."

Then she says that the woman by the window became an emblematic figure in Herrera's history, as did the Tree of Life.

The tree was there when all the armed groups began passing through Herrera, because it was the road that led to the Pacific. It was there when the Liberal guerrillas—the Limpios—arrived in the 1950s, and when the FARC-EP emerged in Marquetalia—seventy kilometers away—in the 1960s, and Herrera became their refuge and home. They traveled those paths without haste. "I saw them send my older cousins on horseback to the market or for medicine, and suddenly some would return home while others stayed in the mountains. I was very little, but I understood. You just observed."

Later, the paramilitaries arrived to fight over that fertile and well-located territory. María Esilda remembers those times. "There were poppy fields everywhere. The guerrillas extorted money from one side, and the paramilitaries from the other. It was difficult." One day, threats arrived at their home. One daughter had an arepa stand; the other, a coffee shop. They were forced to flee. Simply having a public business like that was enough to raise suspicions.

"They would rob people at the Tree of Life. Men would come out of the bars drunk and they would be robbed. Sadly, some people were also killed," María Esilda recounts. There was a time when the tree withered and lost its greenery;


Sur del Tolima

its roots were diseased. So, the women gathered and built a planter at its base to protect it, and it has slowly healed. "This tree has been transformed from death to life, just like us, just like our territory and our people. We have given it new meaning," says her daughter, Sandra Lisbed.

After the FARC-EP guerrillas and the government signed the Peace Agreement in 2016, María Esilda began advocating for its implementation. She was invited to meetings to learn about coexistence and peace, and to discuss how to put the Agreement into practice. They quickly realized that peace was fragile. When five femicides rocked the town in the two years following the signing, the women took to the streets. They marched every November 25th on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, shouting a truth that became their anthem: There is no peace if women are still being killed.

In one meeting, María Esilda recalls voicing an idea that had been on her mind for some time: they needed a women's community center, a place where those at risk could receive support, training, and a place to welcome them and their children. At the same time, with other community leaders, she began investigating what had happened to an abandoned house in downtown Herrera that had once been the House of Culture. The proposal evolved during the discussions. "We all talked and agreed that we needed a dining room for senior citizens, games, kitchenware... that it should serve as a community center, not specifically for women, but a general community center. Because there isn't a single community hall in Herrera," says María Esilda.

With the "Sustaining Peace" program, they were able to equip the house and receive training to organize and manage it. The house reopened. The presidents of the community action boards began meeting there; the indigenous council and the reservation set up an office; and institutional events

were held. Today, boys and girls come to borrow balls and uniforms, and to take chess and music lessons. Baking and sewing courses are offered. There is a community kitchen. "The house is a space for children to occupy their free time and avoid turning to drugs or joining armed groups," says María Esilda. In her reflections, María Esilda recalls that the mountains and rivers of Herrera—the Saldaña, the Hereje—witnessed the violence day after day. But she emphasizes that they have also witnessed her people's efforts to overcome adversity. "Those mountains never stopped being cultivated. Coffee farming and agriculture survived because the people here are very hardworking."

At the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation, María Esilda commands the room. She is loquacious and sharp-witted, her candid honesty drawing the audience into the intimate geography of her life. "My parents traveled extensively throughout the country. My mother, for example, comes from the Valle del Cauca and Antioquia regions. She was an embroiderer," she recounts. It was she, Elvira Gómez, who took the first stitch that has brought María Esilda and the women of Herrera to this exhibition today.

When she speaks of weaving, she uses words like "healing," "drawing peace," and "spinning emotions." She says that embroidery is therapy and also a form of autonomy, economics, and freedom. She says that every time she finishes a piece, she feels she has created a "masterpiece." That is why today she wanted to be elegant: on these walls hangs the great masterpiece of the women of Herrera.



Final reflection[1]

Before these stories could be told—before the community spaces, the Women's Houses, and the sites of memory narrated here became a reality—there was a long and meticulous labor alongside the communities of Caquetá, southern Tolima, and the municipality of Algeciras, in Huila. That journey began long before the first stone was laid or a single workshop was held: it began with the decision to bring together a diverse group of actors committed to protecting the hard-won peace. The essential question was: What is needed to sustain peace in territories with deep wounds and persistent communities?

This work required defining priorities, reaching agreements, and tracing a plan so that collective projects—imagined for years, sometimes decades—would stop being ideas and start becoming facts. This is how "Sustaining Peace" (Sosteniendo la paz) was conceived. The program was born from the needs expressed by the communities through the Territorially Focused Development Programs (PDET), established by the Peace Agreement . Specifically, it focused on projects within Pilar 8, which centers on the processes of reconciliation, coexistence, and peacebuilding that communities demand to ensure violence never returns.

"Sustaining Peace" prioritized 137 of these initiatives and opened a dialogue to agree on how to bring these proposals to life. This was achieved through phases of technical preparation, population targeting, organizational mapping,

1. *Exercise carried out based on testimonies from members of the IOM and the Police Unit for Peacebuilding (UNIPEP) who participated in the project "Sustaining Peace".*

community validation with multiple actors, and sustainability plans. The physical work served as the support; the essence, however, lay in active listening, consensus-building, and strengthening the capacities of the people so that these processes would endure.

Many hands took part in this journey: the IOM, the ART (alongside other entities such as the ARN and UARIV), and a fundamental ally, the Police Unit for Peacebuilding (UNIPEP)—a division established within the National Police of Colombia as part of the Peace Agreement . What lessons does such a process leave behind? What remains when the project ends? To close this book, we wanted to listen to their voices.

"Sustaining peace" was a process of...

Walking a path woven in living words, memories, and gestures.

Each step left its lessons: the dialogue that heals fractures; the community participation that reminds us peace germinates through daily actions; the coordination between institutions and territories that gives body to collective efforts; and the memory that, by honoring the traces of history, illuminates the path toward a more just future.

Cultivating, day by day, that which is common.

It was a process of shedding prejudices and engaging with communities with respect, on equal footing—getting to know their culture, dynamics, history, needs, and purposes.

Looking people in the eye and saying: "Sit down, and let's figure out how we move this forward."

Above all, listening: listening without judgment, listening with sincerity.

Communities expect to be involved and consulted from start to finish.

Understanding that nothing is predetermined. Every path is different. Often, the route must be redesigned or started anew, with the certainty that we build it together and move it forward together.

Building commitments and honoring them, by fulfilling what we promise and being mindful of what we say.

And at the center, peace...

Which is built from the everyday: from community organizing, the minga (Indigenous communal collective labor), the encounter, and the shared word.

Which is not a fixed destination, but a living pulse sustained through conversation, through listening, and through the capacity to transform differences.

Which is longed for by entire families who have suffered greatly and who today, with hope, dare to believe that it is worth giving—and giving themselves—another chance.

Which women have pursued relentlessly, starting with acts of forgiveness and reconciliation among themselves.

For peace, no effort is too small.

"Sustaining peace" allowed us to...

Overcome the mistrust between communities and institutions.

Reaffirm the value of youth leadership as a motor for change.

Highlight the importance and potential of rural life for the country.

Recognizing the country's cultural diversity by harmonizing project initiatives with the traditional wisdom of ethnic groups.

Acknowledging the prevention efforts and commitment to peaceful coexistence led by the National Police within the territories.

Forge agreements, endure uncomfortable dialogues, and never give up.

Open paths where life, at last, can come first.

See the eyes of women as they work for peace.

Witness victims and ex-combatants working together: one of the most significant achievements of the process.

Listen to the voices of children and adolescents that evoke hope and invite us to persist on collective work.

Look one another in the eye and recognize our shared humanity: the greatest act of dignity.