

The Social Origins of Human Rights
Popular Responses to Political Violence in a Colombian Oil Refinery Town
1919-1993

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Abstract

This dissertation examines why, how and with what impact people living in conflict areas organize collectively to assert human rights. The focus is the emergence in the 1980s of a human rights movement in the oil enclave of Barrancabermeja. The Barrancabermeja-based Regional Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) was created in 1987 in the context of dirty war fought on multiple fronts between state security forces and their paramilitary allies, on the one hand, and Marxist insurgent groups, on the other. In exploring the history of a human rights movement in one of Colombia's most chronically war-affected regions, this dissertation expands our understanding of how frontline activists interpret human rights principles from the bottom-up. Human rights movements cannot be viewed as axiomatic or simple humanitarian responses to political violence. The term "human rights" refers to contingent norms and practices that are derived from lived experiences of authoritarianism, war, poverty and social exclusion. In this dissertation I argue that social activists in the war-torn Colombian oil town of Barrancabermeja undertook human rights activism both as a strategy of self-preservation and as a transformative praxis. In Barrancabermeja, the struggle for human rights did not displace or supplant longstanding local struggles for social justice and political change. Rather, human rights was considered to be a form of social protest consistent with previously existing traditions of popular radicalism for which Barrancabermeja has become celebrated.

Résumé

Cette thèse de doctorat examine l'action collective en faveur des droits humains organisée par des personnes vivant en zone de conflit, analysant les raisons qui ont motivé cette démarche, la façon par laquelle elle fut mise en œuvre et ses impacts concrets. L'analyse cible particulièrement l'apparition d'un mouvement des droits humains dans l'enclave pétrolière de Barrancabermeja. Le Comité régional pour la défense des droits humains (CREDHOS) fut établi en 1987 alors que sévissait sur plusieurs fronts une guerre sale opposant l'État colombien et ses alliés paramilitaires aux insurgés marxistes. En ciblant la création d'un mouvement des droits humains dans une des régions de la Colombie les plus affligées par la guerre, cette thèse révèle comment les principes des droits humains peuvent être interprétés de façon singulière par les activistes en zone de combat. L'émergence de mouvements des droits humains ne peut être réduite à un réflexe humanitaire pour contrer la violence politique. Le concept même de droits humains fait référence à des pratiques et normes contingentes qui ont été modelées par l'expérience des régimes autoritaires, de la guerre, de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale. Les gens qui militaient en faveur des droits humains dans l'enclave pétrolière de Barrancabermeja ont mis en œuvre leur activisme en poursuivant deux buts : d'une part, celui-ci constituait une stratégie d'autodéfense contre la violence politique; d'autre part, il représentait une pratique sociale réformatrice. Les luttes en faveur d'une plus grande justice sociale qui animaient déjà Barrancabermeja depuis des décennies n'ont pas été supplantées par ce nouvel activisme pour les droits humains. Au contraire, le militantisme entourant la promotion des droits humains était compatible avec cette tradition de radicalisme populaire qui avait fait la renommée de Barrancabermeja.

For Nicolasa and Jordi.

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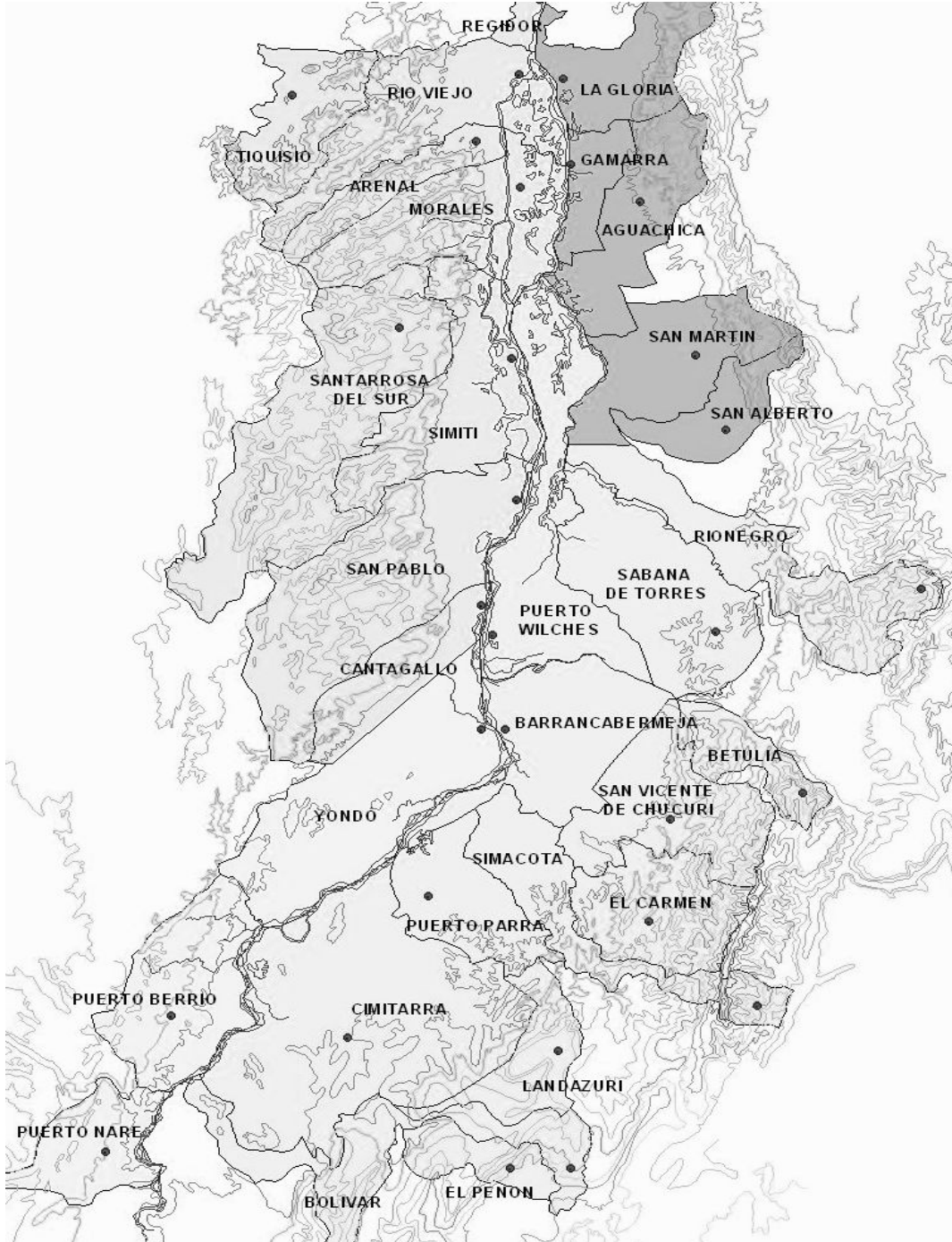
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Map 1. Political Map of Colombia¹



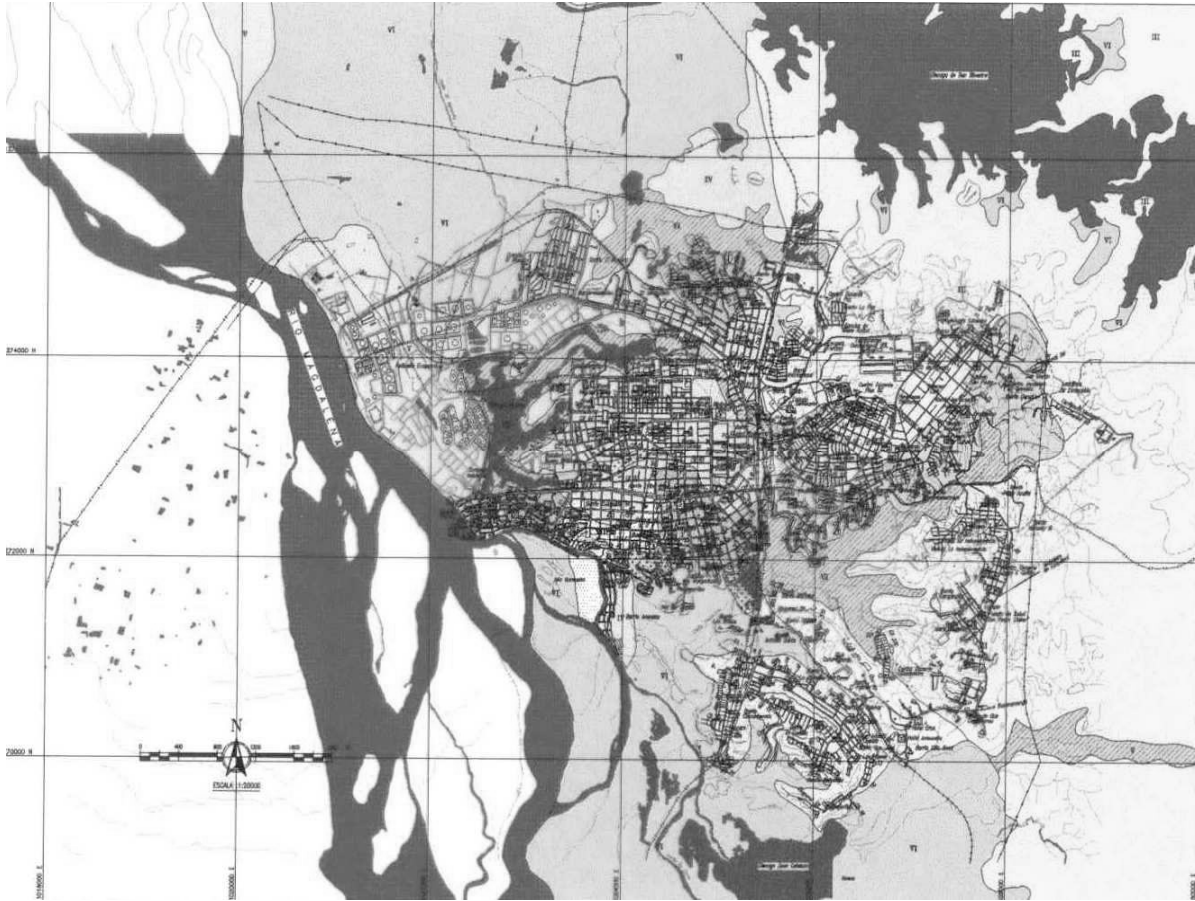
¹ http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/colombia_map.htm

Map 2. Magdalena Medio Region of Colombia²



² Source: *Observatorio de Paz Integral* (OPI), a joint project of the Universidad de la Paz, the *Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos* (CREDHOS), the Diocese of Barrancabermeja, the Human Rights Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo) and the Program for Development and Peace of the Magdalena Medio (PDPMM).

Map 3. Barrancabermeja City Map³



The city of Barrancabermeja (official population 191,000 as of 2005 census) is located on the Magdalena River, approximately 500 kilometres from the Caribbean coast, in a humid lowland region known as the Magdalena Medio. Barrancabermeja is divided into four quadrants: central, southeast, northeast, north and south. The central district is separated from the other areas of the city by a railroad track. The state-owned oil refinery is located northwest of the city's main commercial district.

³ Source: International Institute of Seismology and Earthquake Engineering.
http://iisee.kenken.go.jp/net/seismic_design_code/colombia/microzonation/fig9_barrancabermeja.html

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INTRODUCTION

Human Rights as Social Protest

CREDHOS was not born out of the blue, it was born in the heat of everything that was happening at the time, on the one hand the violence, and on the other hand the efforts to build an infrastructure worthy of Barrancabermeja, being a rich city... social movements were on the threshold of a very important struggle.¹

Rafael Gómez, human rights activist

The War on Human Rights Defenders

On January 18, 1989 paramilitaries posing as Marxist guerrillas murdered 12 government human rights investigators in the small town of La Rochela, Santander. The commission whose members were massacred at La Rochela was set up in response to pressure from grassroots human rights groups in the Magdalena Medio region and an Inter-American Court of Human Rights judgment ordering the Colombian state to investigate illegal paramilitary activity in a rural area to the south of the oil refining town of Barrancabermeja. Judges and lawyers had been subject to attacks in the past.² But never had government human rights officials been so audaciously targeted, and with such a deep impact on Colombian society. Had the commission been allowed to carry out its

¹ Rafael Gómez Serrano (founding member of the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, CREDHOS), interview with author, Bogotá (September 27, 2005).

² “Between 1979 and 1991 [in Colombia] an annual average of 25 judges and lawyers were killed or were victims of an attempted homicide”. See *Case of the Rochela Massacre v. Colombia Judgment*, Inter-American Court of Human Rights (May 11, 2007). The murders carried out in this period included two Ministers of Justice (Rodrigo Lara Bonilla in 1984 and Enrique Low Murta in 1991) and one Attorney General (Carlos Mauro Hoyos in 1988), presumed to have been killed by drug traffickers, and 11 Supreme Court Justices killed in 1985 during the XVII Army Brigade’s assault on the Palace of Justice in Bogotá after it had been occupied by M-19 guerrillas.

work, it would have represented an important step towards Colombia's compliance with international human rights law. Instead, La Rochela announced the start of a war on human rights defenders in Colombia. Over the next two decades, hundreds of Colombian activists and justice officials would be threatened, forced into exile or killed.

The significance of the La Rochela massacre is deeply rooted in the history of human rights in one of Colombia's most conflictive regions.³ The La Rochela massacre demonstrated that human rights activism was a threat to the counterinsurgency nexus of paramilitaries, armed forces personnel and drug traffickers that came together in the Magdalena Medio in the 1980s. By 1989 the strategically located and resource-rich Magdalena Medio region, where Barrancabermeja is located, was the staging ground for a national right-wing paramilitary movement. Self-styled "private justice" groups and the Colombian military sought to achieve hegemony over Marxist insurgents active in the region by eliminating uncooperative peasants and social activists. The victims of La Rochela were working on behalf of the Office of the Inspector General of Colombia. At the time of the massacre, a diverse network of progressive social movements based in the industrial enclave of Barrancabermeja was beginning to rally around the cause of human rights. Large popular protests decrying political violence were being organized on a regular basis. Local activists were eager to expose human rights violators.⁴

³ The consensus definition of a massacre is the simultaneous killing of four or more people. Human Rights Watch, *War Without Quarter: Colombia and International Humanitarian Law* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1998), 35.

⁴ In February of 1989 local social and political activists submitted reports to the regional branch of the Office of the Inspector General concerning the participation of high-ranking military officials in the La Rochela massacre. See "Case of the Rochela Massacre v. Colombia Judgment", Inter-American Court of Human Rights (May 11, 2007), 48.

By their very existence, paramilitary groups obfuscated state responsibility for human rights abuses. It took two decades to officially clarify the events surrounding La Rochela. On May 11, 2007, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held the Colombian state responsible for the La Rochela massacre. It was, in the words of one of the lawyers who represented the victims' families, "The first time that the state has been found guilty of collaborating in the murder of other agents of the state".⁵ The fact that military personnel would murder government officials hints at the ways in which particular histories and political exigencies have shaped different branches of the Colombian state.⁶ On the one hand, the Office of the Inspector General of Colombia was under pressure to fulfill its mandate as overseer of human rights in Colombia. On the other hand, the Colombian military was deeply engaged in a Cold War counterinsurgency campaign in the Magdalena Medio. The La Rochela massacre confirmed the lengths to which the military was prepared to go to avoid scrutiny.

In the aftermath of La Rochela, human rights defenders in the Magdalena Medio would have to carry out their work under a cloud of fear. It was a terrible omen for the recently-established Barrancabermeja-based Regional Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS).⁷ But the massacre did not stop CREDHOS from openly denouncing injustices being committed in the region, whether through the press or at public meetings and protests, or in direct conversation with national government and armed forces officials. In July of 1989 CREDHOS hosted the first major forum on

⁵ "Colombia Ordered to Pay \$7.8 Million in Paramilitary Massacre of 12 Judicial Workers," Associated Press (June 9, 2007).

⁶ Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 218.

⁷ The *Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*, now known as the *Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*.

human rights in the Magdalena Medio. It was attended by about 1,000 people, including peasant, church and labour groups, national government and armed forces officials, as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations from Bogotá. All four of Colombia's main leftist guerrilla organizations also sent delegations.⁸ CREDHOS president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo spared no one in his formal address to the conference plenary. He railed against the paramilitaries, drug traffickers and corrupt armed forces:

They are conspiring against the tranquility of this region: multinational interests want to plunder the riches of the subsoil without obstacles; agribusiness, ranchers and farmers need to guarantee the stability of land tenure; drug traffickers search for ways of legalizing their profits and the projects promoted by the most militaristic sectors of the armed forces to impose "National Security" doctrines. These are all factors that have led the State to lose its monopoly on the use of force... and its [ability] to impose the rule of law, as private interests take the "administration of justice" into their own hands.⁹

Gómez likewise argued that left-wing guerrilla groups' pursuit of power compromised the security of the civilian population in the region.¹⁰ It was a rare and revealing moment. Open meetings between social movements, state officials and Marxist insurgents were extraordinarily rare in Colombia.¹¹ It would be the last time such a meeting would be held in Barranca.

⁸ The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and the April 19 Movement (M-19).

⁹ Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, CREDHOS, "Encuentro regional sobre la situación de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia: testimonios, ponencias, conclusiones" (1989), 12. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹ As anthropologist Leah Carroll has discussed, peace negotiations between insurgent groups and the Colombian government in the 1980s created the conditions that allowed guerrilla spokespeople to attend public meetings in certain areas of the country. But such opportunities for dialogue disappeared as the repression of guerrilla supporters increased. Leah Carroll, "The Patriotic Union and its Successors in Arauca, 1984-2007: from Electoral Power to Leadership in the Struggle Against Impunity," Conference Paper, Latin American Studies Association, October 6-9, 2010 (Toronto).

Between 1982 and 2002 thousands of people were killed in Barrancabermeja as a consequence of direct orders given and carried out by the Colombian armed forces and their paramilitary allies, on the one hand, and Marxist rebels, on the other.¹² During this period many more people were also disappeared, detained, imprisoned, threatened, tortured, or forcibly displaced. No other urban centre in Latin America has sustained a longer and more devastating period of political violence than Barrancabermeja. Between 1998 and 2001, when paramilitary organizations made a final push into the city, Barrancabermeja registered more than 10 political murders per week. At the peak of violence in 2000 the regional office of the *Defensoría del Pueblo*, or Human Rights Ombudsman, reported 539 homicides, a murder rate three times the Colombian average, or 25 times that of New York City.¹³

¹² It is impossible to calculate the political homicide rate for Barrancabermeja during this period with total accuracy. Based on government and non-governmental sources, we can estimate that there were between 3,000 and 5,000 murders committed in Barranca between 1982 and 2002. Another 1,000 homicides were committed in Barrancabermeja between 2003 and 2009. One human rights researcher, using media reports as her main source, has estimated that 398 politically-motivated murders were committed in Barrancabermeja between 1980 and 1992. Amanda Romero, *Magdalena Medio: luchas sociales y violaciones de derechos humanos 1980-1992* (Bogotá: Corporación Avre, 1992), 108. The human rights group CREDHOS documented 902 homicides between 1988 and 1990 alone, most of which it believes were carried out by armed groups. CREDHOS, “La complicidad de la indiferencia” (April 1991), 19. The Colombian government’s National Department of Statistics (DANE) recorded 331 homicides for the year 1991. Vicepresidencia de la República de Colombia, “Panorama actual de Barrancabermeja” (Bogotá: Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario, 2001), 8. The Coroner’s Office in Barrancabermeja documented 1,307 homicides between 1999 and 2003. The Coroner’s Office concluded that 84-89 per cent of the homicides committed in 2000 (429 of 480) and 2001 (325 of 383) were politically-motivated. See reports by Centro de Referencia Nacional Sobre la Violencia, “Lesiones infligidas por otros”, published between 1999 and 2008. <http://www.medicinalegal.gov.co/>.

¹³ Adam Isaacson, “The New Masters of Barranca”, Center for International Policy (April 2001). <http://www.ciponline.org/colombia/0401barr.htm>.

This dissertation examines why, how and with what consequences people living in conflict areas organise collectively to assert human rights. The Barrancabermeja-based Regional Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) was formed in 1987 in the midst of an armed conflict in which the majority of victims were civilians. Paramilitary units working in collaboration with state security forces had been carrying out a counterinsurgency campaign in the southern Magdalena Medio region since the early 1980s. At the same time, guerrilla groups sought to expand their influence and control over strategic territories. In response to paramilitary attacks against civilians living in guerrilla controlled areas, tens of thousands of people abandoned the war-torn countryside, seeking refuge in shantytowns on the outskirts of Barrancabermeja. By the middle of the decade, a “dirty war” of assassinations and forced disappearances was being waged on the streets of the city, targeting social and political leaders and activists. In the late 1980s CREDHOS brought together popular movements from Barranca and the surrounding Magdalena Medio region for the purpose of exposing the perpetrators of violence, advocating on behalf of victims and their families, calling upon the Colombian state to protect human rights, and denouncing the deeper socio-economic inequalities they saw as sources of conflict.

Legal scholar Upendra Baxi has written that the history of contemporary human rights movements are “chronicles of contingency” that must be understood within their specific local contexts.¹⁴ He suggests that we need to develop a "social theory of human rights" that can account for the diversity of popular responses to repression and suffering. One way of undertaking this important project is to tell the history of human rights from

¹⁴ Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), xi.

the perspective of frontline activists who seek to stem violence through direct action, rather than from the perspective of the United Nations' functionaries, elected officials and judges who are responsible for negotiating and enforcing legal norms. Chilean philosopher Helio Gallardo has written that human rights can only be effectively implemented to the extent that they are supported by popular social struggles.¹⁵ By seeking to better comprehend the circumstances that give rise to human rights movements at the local level, we can illuminate the specific ways in which human rights are constructed and utilized. This approach will also allow us to better observe the historical changes set in motion by the advancement of human rights.

The special circumstances surrounding the creation of the human rights movement in Barrancabermeja recalls this challenge. Barranca, as the city is popularly known, is recognized internationally as the "heart of activism" in Colombia.¹⁶ The remarkable longevity and combativeness of Barranca's social movements is due to its unique history as an oil refining centre as well as widespread identification amongst *barranqueños* with radical nationalist, working-class and anti-establishment politics. In the words of Irene Villamizar, who has worked for 30 years as a teacher and community activist in the city's poor southeastern *barrios*: "This town does not belong to the rich".¹⁷

¹⁵ Helio Gallardo, *Derechos humanos como movimiento social* (Bogotá: Ediciones Desde Abajo, 2006).

¹⁶ Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Colombia. 58th session of the UN Human Rights Commission, Geneva, March 13, 2002.

¹⁷ Irene Villamizar (teacher and school administrator, founding member of Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, CREDHOS, community organizer for Pastoral Social), interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

Reading Human Rights Movements

Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) repeatedly accused Colombian human rights activists of being apologists for guerrilla violence.¹⁸ Official criticism of human rights groups in Colombia has hardened in spite of the fact that human rights monitoring in the country has never been more professional, technologically sophisticated or mainstream. Every year hundreds of detailed reports are published by local, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies concerned with the defence of human rights in Colombia. Besides the presence of numerous human rights NGOs in Bogotá and other cities, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) had a permanent presence in Colombia for more than a decade beginning in 1997, and a human rights monitoring office of the Organization of American States (OAS) has been present since 2004. The *Defensoría del Pueblo*, or Human Rights Ombudsman of Colombia, is a state institution with 37 regional offices throughout the country, including one in Barrancabermeja. Local delegates for the Human Rights Ombudsman speak out against all armed groups, often at tremendous personal risk. The Attorney General investigates both guerrilla and paramilitary violence, including incidents of collusion between

¹⁸ President Uribe's first major public attack on Colombian human rights activists was delivered on September 8, 2003 in Bogotá on the occasion of the appointment of General Edgar Lésmez as Air Force Commander, amidst speculation that Lésmez' predecessor had been relieved of duty so that he could evade charges of obstructing human rights investigations. Throughout the speech, President Uribe referred repeatedly to human rights "traffickers" who profit from making the Colombian state look bad. Presidencia de la República, "Palabras del Presidente Uribe en posesión de Nuevo Comandante de la Fuerza Aérea de Colombia, Bogotá," Álvaro Uribe Vélez, http://www.presidencia.gov.co/prensa_new/discursos/fac.htm.

paramilitaries and the army. The Colombian armed forces and national police also compile human rights statistics.

One of the outcomes of the intense monitoring of human rights in Colombia has been increased competition between NGOs and the state, and between different branches of the state, over the veracity of rights “claims and counter claims”.¹⁹ On the one hand, armed forces officers and politicians denigrate and stigmatize the work of human rights organizations. On the other hand, NGOs accuse the Colombian state of ignoring human rights, repressing social movements and abetting paramilitarism. There is constant disagreement amongst these parties about whether the guerrillas, paramilitaries or state security forces commit the most human rights violations.

Colombian human rights activists have been recognized internationally for their vision, leadership, courage, sophistication and perseverance in the face of constant threats and the capricious nature of global politics.²⁰ The profile of Colombia’s embattled human rights activists reached a high point in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Prior to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Colombia was the number one foreign policy concern of the United States government. In June 2000 a \$1.3 billion U.S. “counter-narcotics” package was signed into law by President Bill Clinton. Human rights groups sought to forestall “Plan Colombia” by exposing links between the

¹⁹ Winifred Tate, “Counting the Dead: Human Rights Claims and Counter-Claims in Colombia” (PhD diss., New York University, 2005).

²⁰ Colombian human rights activists have received multiple awards from international human rights organizations, including the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award (1998); Martin Ennals Award (2001 and 2003); John Humphrey Freedom Award (1997 and 2003); Human Rights First Award (2001 and 2009); and the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award (1991, 1998 and 2007); amongst others. The first major international honour given to a Colombian human rights activist was the 1991 Letelier-Moffitt Award conferred on Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, co-founder and first president of CREDHOS.

Colombian armed forces and paramilitary death squads. As the legislation was being discussed in the U.S. Congress, dozens of Colombian human rights activists made trips to Washington, D.C. to convince lawmakers not to approve President Clinton's thinly-veiled counterinsurgency plan. Liberal-minded Democrats insisted on humanitarian assistance for the thousands of people certain to be displaced by the Plan Colombia-funded military push into Colombia's rebel-controlled south.²¹ Opportunists jostled for arms contracts. The attacks commonly referred to simply as "9/11" then dramatically reduced the international visibility of Colombian human rights struggles. But human rights continued to dominate debate about Colombia in foreign policy and international cooperation circles, both in North America and Europe. While the international media spotlight on Colombia has dimmed somewhat, debate around human rights amongst Colombians and concerned international observers is more rigorous than ever before.

Some of the most innovative and influential academic scholarship on Colombia over the past 50 years concerns the problem of violence. Generations of social scientists and historians have been called into service to help explain the country's devastating and extraordinarily complex cycles of social and political conflict. Published in 1962 as a two volume set, *La Violencia en Colombia* was the first independent and comprehensive study of the phenomenon of violence, and remains a foundational text for the Colombian

²¹ At U.S. Senate hearings evaluating the progress of Plan Colombia in October 2003, expert witnesses and legislators recurrently made the link between Plan Colombia, eradication of drug crops, and forced internal migration. According to expert witnesses, there were nearly 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia at the time. Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. "Challenges and Successes for U.S. Policy Towards Colombia: Is Plan Colombia Working?" (October 29, 2003), 34.

human rights movement.²² In the 1980s the many scholars who study violence in Colombia became known simply as *violentólogos*. The most significant work published in this era was the government-commissioned analysis of violence produced under the direction of historian Gonzalo Sánchez in 1987, entitled *Colombia: violencia y democracia*.²³ There has been a tremendous amount of debate on the main issues raised in these seminal works, most notably on the relationships between political violence, state formation and capitalist development.

By contrast, little scholarly work has been produced on the politics and history of human rights organizing in Colombia.²⁴ However, the field is growing. In recent years, important new research has been published that reflects the complexity of the debate around human rights in Colombia. Colombia is home to dozens of self-described human rights organizations, which run the gamut from those who represent the victims of

²² Germán Guzmán Campos, Orlando Fals Borda and Eduardo Umaña Luna, *La Violencia en Colombia* 2 vols. 1st reprinting (Bogotá: Taurus Historia, 2005).

²³ The term *violentología* came into common usage amongst Colombian academics in the 1980s, at a time when explanations of violence in Colombia that went beyond the hypothesis of competition between Liberals and Conservatives gained mainstream recognition. Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia, *Colombia: violencia y democracia. Informe presentado al Ministerio de Gobierno* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1987). For a review of the literature during this period of debate in Colombia, see Catherine C. LeGrand, "La Política y la violencia en Colombia (1946-1965): interpretaciones en la década de los ochenta," *Memoria y sociedad* 2:4 (November 1997), 79-110.

²⁴ Pioneering studies include Sophie Daviaud, "Las ONGs colombianas de defensa de los DDHH de cara a las violencias", in Eric Lair and Gonzalo Sánchez, eds., *Violencias y estrategias colectivas en la región andina: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú y Venezuela* (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004); Robin Kirk, *More Terrible than Death: Violence, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003); Flor Alba Romero, "El movimiento de derechos humanos en Colombia"; in Mauricio Archila and Mauricio Pardo, eds., *Movimientos sociales, Estado y democracia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios Sociales, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2001); Christopher Welna and Gustavo Gallón, eds., *Peace, Democracy, and Human Rights in Colombia* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

guerrilla kidnappings to those associated with social movements that are critical of the government. It is the latter group that has come under the harshest criticism. Some academics criticize the Colombian human rights movement for soft-pedaling criticism of the guerrillas.²⁵ Others posit that because many human rights groups were formed by the victims of state-sponsored violence, they cannot be held up to putative standards of neutrality. In her 2001 essay on the history of human rights activism in Colombia, anthropologist Flor Alba Romero explains: “The movement for the defence of human rights emerges during the 1970s in open conflict with the state”.²⁶ Colombia’s Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) is the only prominent human rights organization to publish a book recounting their history.²⁷ The only academic book published on human rights activism in Colombia to date is anthropologist Winifred Tate’s groundbreaking ethnography entitled *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (2007).

Colombian trends mirror regional trends. While there is a rich literature on Latin American social movements, there have been surprisingly few studies specifically concerning the origins of human rights activism.²⁸ This deficit is particularly surprising given the fact that the struggle for human rights in Latin America has been led by some

²⁵ Luis Alberto Restrepo M., “The Equivocal Dimensions of Human Rights in Colombia”, in Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez, eds., *Violence in Colombia 1990-2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Books, 2001).

²⁶ Romero “El movimiento de derechos humanos en Colombia”, 445.

²⁷ Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos, *Veinte años de historia y lucha: ASFADDES con todo el derecho* (Bogotá: ASFADDES, 2003).

²⁸ The same is generally true for other world regions, with a few exceptions. The U.S. civil rights movement has been extraordinarily well documented. For a survey of the first generation of scholarship on the civil rights movement, see Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement”, *American Historical Review* 96:2 (April 1991), 456-471.

extraordinarily distinguished and charismatic public figures, including Nobel Peace Prize laureates Adolfo Pérez Esquivel from Argentina (1978) and Rigoberta Menchú from Guatemala (1992). The most closely examined case is that of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, whose very public struggle to find their missing children has inspired dozens of academic books, articles, memoirs, documentary and feature films.²⁹

Otherwise, few Latin American human rights movements have been the focus of detailed academic study. In the existing literature there are hardly any works by historians.³⁰

Notwithstanding the dearth of scholarship on human rights activism, many of Colombia's leading academics are socially engaged, and their work is directly concerned with popular responses to political violence.³¹ Following a wider Latin American trend,

²⁹ See Marjorie Agosín, *Circles of Madness: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1992); Michelle D. Bonner, *Sustaining Human Rights: Women and Argentine Human Rights Organizations* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994); Josephine Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

³⁰ One exception is historian Temma Kaplan, who focuses on women human rights activists in Latin America and Spain. See Temma Kaplan, "Uncommon Women and the Common Good: Women and Environmental Protest", in Sheila Rowbotham and Stephanie Linkogle, eds., *Women Resist Globalization: Mobilizing for Livelihood and Rights* (London and New York: ZED Books, 2002), 28-45; Temma Kaplan, "Women as Agents of Social Change", in Marjorie Agosín, ed., *Women, Gender, and Human Rights: A Global Perspective* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2001), 191-204; Temma Kaplan, "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Grassroots Women Redefine Citizenship in a Global Context", in Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes and Marilyn Lake eds., *Women's Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 290-308.

³¹ The Department of History at Colombia's National University in Bogotá was founded in 1960. During the 1960s scholars there began writing social and socio-economic history and expressing concern about the lacunae in the historiography of Colombia. See Jaime Jaramillo Uribe and Frank Safford, "An Interview with Jaime Jaramillo Uribe," *Hispanic American Historic Review* 64:1 (February 1984), 1-15. The leading Colombian social historian of the past 30 years is Mauricio Archila, whose oral history of labour and popular culture in Barrancabermeja is seminal to my research. See Mauricio Archila Neira, *Aquí nadie es forastero: Testimonios sobre la formación de una cultura radical*

in recent years there have been a number of important studies on Colombian labour, indigenous, peasant and women's movements. This has included research into collective resistance to violence amongst internally displaced populations and communities of African-Colombian descent.³²

Human Rights in Crisis

As the Colombian case illustrates, the very idea of human rights is in crisis. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, governments the world over have curtailed basic civil liberties in the name of combating terrorism. At the same time, defending human rights has served as justification for the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.³³ It is not surprising that in this context a growing number of scholars and activists are reconsidering the history of human rights since the adoption of

Barrancabermeja, 1920-1950 (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, 1978). Mauricio Archila has also written the best historical overview of social movement organizing. See Mauricio Archila, *Idas y venidas: vueltas y revueltas. Protestas sociales en Colombia, 1958-1990* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, ICANH, y el Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP, 2004).

³² For work on women, peasants, indigenous groups and internally displaced communities, see Luz Margoth Pulido, Ana Luz Rodríguez and Betty Pedraza, eds. *Entre el fuego: tres experiencias de participación en zonas de conflicto armado* (Bogotá: Fundación para la Participación Comunitaria, ARCOMUN, and Acción EcuMénica Sueca, 2000); María Clemencia Ramírez, *Entre el estado y la guerrilla: identidad y ciudadanía en el movimiento de los campesinos cocaleros del Putumayo* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, Colciencias, 2001); León Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia: Struggles of the National Peasant Association, 1967-1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Leslie Wirpsa, "Oil Exploitation and Indigenous Rights: Global Regime Network Conflict in the Andes" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2004); Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Mauricio García Villegas, eds. *Emancipación social y violencia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004).

³³ Noam Chomsky is one of the most widely read scholars to critique the instrumentalization of human rights by the U.S. government. See Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights* vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1979).

the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Have human rights made a difference? What is their legacy? One of the most compelling debates to emerge in the past decade concerns the role of civil society organizations in promoting human rights. Some authors argue that transnational networks comprised of social activists have been effective in promoting human rights and democratization.³⁴ Other authors respond that the dominant human rights discourse privileges individual over collective rights and therefore constitutes a poor framework for genuine social change.³⁵ Finally, there are authors who maintain that human rights are an important field of counter-hegemonic political and social struggle for progressive movements.³⁶

In her highly influential writings on transnational human rights networks, Kathryn Sikkink has demonstrated that grassroots activists have been successful in shaping the behaviour of states. The “naming and shaming” of human rights violators, when combined with economic and political pressure, has proven an effective strategy in some

³⁴ Jessica T. Matthews, “Power Shift”, *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 1997), 50-67.

³⁵ The notion of collective rights has been defended by Marxists and anticolonial movements as a rejoinder to the liberal conception of individual rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples was adopted on July 4, 1976 by a meeting of civil society groups, political parties and national liberation movements in Algiers, Algeria. See James Crawford, ed., *The Rights of Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). More recently, debate around collective rights has occurred with respect to the recognition of special group rights, particularly the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007. In recent Colombian history, collective rights were introduced into law by the 1991 Constitution, which recognizes some collective rights for indigenous and African-Colombian peoples. See Donna Lee Van Cott, *The Friendly Liquidation of the Past: The Politics of Diversity in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

³⁶ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation* 2nd ed. (London: Butterworths LexisNexis, 2002); Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights*; Balakrishnan Rajagopal, *International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

cases.³⁷ In her conception, human rights movements begin to effect change when local civil society activists alert the international community to human rights atrocities.³⁸ Governments that violate human rights typically deny allegations of abuse and go on the counterattack. This is often followed by a back-and-forth debate between international organizations and specific states, until “norm-consistent behaviour,” or compliance with human rights law, is achieved and sustained. Sikkink observes that beginning in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America, “human rights provided a common ground for diverse groups to frame their concerns and work together”.³⁹ Argentina is considered by some scholars to be a successful case because of the way in which NGOs and foreign governments rallied to force the Argentinean military junta out of power. Between 1977 and 1982 local activists such as the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* and Nobel Laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, in cooperation with international NGOs and the UN as well as the U.S. Congress and Department of State, all acted in favour of a transition to formal democracy in Argentina.⁴⁰ From Argentina to South Africa, human rights have been credited with providing a framework for social and political change.

An important critical literature has emerged in response to what some authors see as human rights triumphalism. Greg Grandin, a prominent historian of Latin America who has written extensively on the subject, maintains that the U.S. government has

³⁷ Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 107.

³⁸ Kathryn Sikkink and Thomas Risse, “The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practice”, in Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22-35.

³⁹ Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

always utilized human rights law and rhetoric to defend its allies and weaken its enemies. According to Grandin, human rights movements are limited because they rely on foreign governments and international organizations for support.⁴¹ The discourse of human rights cannot easily be disentangled from the legal defense of class privileges.⁴² The highly selective use of human rights law and discourse by the major Western powers has effectively neutralized grassroots attempts to challenge repressive regimes that operate within the U.S. sphere of influence. Grandin writes:

In Latin America in the 1980s... dissidents suffering under the lash of counterinsurgent terror tried to use the idea of human rights to ward off slaughter and to weaken U.S. patronage of their tormentors. Yet unfortunately for them, the effectiveness of human rights claims was indexed to political power.⁴³

Grandin has argued that the advance of human rights discourse confirmed the collapse of movements for national liberation in Latin America. He suggests that human rights were adopted in Guatemala in the 1980s as a defensive strategy by severely diminished popular movements.⁴⁴ He writes: “The struggle was no longer a progressive, historically

⁴¹ For a critical survey of United States foreign policy and human rights, see Julie Mertus, *Bait and Switch: Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy* 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁴² The right to own private property, protected under Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is frequently cited as evidence linking human rights to liberal democratic capitalism. Human rights have also been linked historically to the protection of corporate “privileges and immunities” enjoyed by the members of exclusive groups including the military, clergy and elected parliaments. David Zaret, “Tradition, Human Rights and the English Revolution”, in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom et al., eds., *Human Rights and Revolutions* 2nd ed. (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 47.

⁴³ Greg Grandin, “Human Rights and Empire’s Embrace: A Latin American Counterpoint”, *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁴ Grandin has focused the same critical lens on the question of human rights as a framework for justice in the aftermath of violence, in his discussion of truth and reconciliation commissions. Greg Grandin, “The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, State Formation, and National Identity in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala,” *American Historical Review* 109:1 (February 2005), 46-67; Greg Grandin

inevitable fight for a more socially just nation... It became a rearguard fight for survival, an attempt to establish the rule of law and respect for basic human rights".⁴⁵ Grandin suggests that human rights NGOs have functioned as places of refuge for threatened activists. Small non-governmental organizations, however dynamic, are no substitute for more broad-based movements.⁴⁶ In his study of South Africa's transition to democratic rule, legal scholar Makau Mutua contends that human rights have proven to be a woefully inadequate medium for transforming entrenched inequalities. Mutua demonstrates how human rights protected narrow conceptions of individual freedom at the expense of broader social justice.⁴⁷

Has the language of human rights displaced the language of socialism and revolution that was such an important part of Latin American political culture prior to the end of the Cold War?⁴⁸ What are the implications of such a shift? Do human rights signal the triumph of liberal democracy? Or are they potentially counter-hegemonic? Can human rights movements that emerge out of mass popular movements – as was the case in Barranca, and in other parts of Latin America – challenge political power? Boaventura de Sousa Santos takes a more utopian view of these issues than do Grandin and Mutua. The prominent legal scholar and spokesperson for the World Social Forum suggests that human rights movements constitute a form of progressive globalization

and Thomas Miller Klubock, eds., "Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory," special issue of *Radical History Review* 2007: 97 (Winter 2007).

⁴⁵ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁷ Makau Mutua, *Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 198.

⁴⁸ Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

from below. He argues that human rights derive their competence from ideological pluralism and multicultural recognition amongst social movements, leaving space for local expressions of universal principles. This is a key distinction between state-centred and civil society-centred understandings of human rights:

Throughout the world, millions of people and thousands of non-governmental organizations have been struggling for human rights, often at great risk, in defence of oppressed social classes and groups that in many instances have been victimized by authoritarian capitalistic states... The central task of emancipatory politics of our time, in this domain, consists in transforming the conceptualization and practice of human rights from a globalized localism into a cosmopolitan struggle.⁴⁹

Progressive legal scholar Upendra Baxi agrees that the struggle for rights can be “an arena of transformative political practice”.⁵⁰ According to Baxi and Santos, popular approaches to the study of human rights allow us to see the way in which human rights are constructed from the bottom-up.

In this dissertation I argue that “human rights” refers to a set of contingent norms and practices, derived from lived experiences of authoritarianism, war, poverty and exclusion.⁵¹ The founding documents of the contemporary international human rights movement – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments ratified by states, affirming that all persons be guaranteed the right to life and freedom from cruel or arbitrary treatment – are normative frameworks embedded in

⁴⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Towards a Multicultural Conception of Human Rights”, in *Space of Culture: City, Nation, World*, 2nd ed., eds. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 220.

⁵⁰ Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights*, 10.

⁵¹ See Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, ed., *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: A Quest for Consensus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

specific histories.⁵² Drafted in the wake of the Second World War, the Universal Declaration constituted an exercise in reflection upon the atrocities committed by the German state under Nazi rule.⁵³ The principles enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights are a legacy of the survivors of Second World War atrocities, whose pursuit of justice shed new light on the repressive actions of states. The Declaration's claim of universality challenged the limitations of citizenship and an international system that protected human rights abusers by privileging the inviolability of the nation-state over popular sovereignty.⁵⁴ Not often recognized, the Universal Declaration also reflected concerns about social and economic justice, thanks to Latin American countries' insistence that some collective rights be included.⁵⁵ Since the

⁵² Susan Waltz, "Rebuilding and Reclaiming the History of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", *Third World Quarterly* 23:3 (June 2002), 437-448.

⁵³ "The common revulsion toward the Holocaust provided the consensus needed to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 17.

⁵⁴ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951). Arendt's observations about "rightlessness" and the failure to protect ethnic and religious minorities in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century are fundamental to contemporary critiques of human rights. Some scholars argue that citizenship has been used to deny rights to scores of individuals and communities, notably refugees, undocumented migrants, and ethnic minorities living in the industrialized north. Political scientist Peter Nyers summarizes this debate: "...citizenship is a concept that is derived from a specifically European lineage and so represents a kind of conceptual imperialism that effaces other ways of being political. To be sure, much of the theorization of citizenship seems to assume a rather narrow world view, and one that brackets out much of the world outside of Europe, North America, and Australia. The majority of the world's population, it would seem, exists only as migratory movements seeking to gain access to the benefits of citizenship in the West". Peter Nyers, "Introduction: Why Citizenship Studies," *Citizenship Studies* 11:1 (February 2007), 2.

⁵⁵ The inclusion of social rights in the Universal Declaration can be attributed in part to the personal biases of some key Latin American negotiators and to the influence of Latin American nationalist and populist movements at the time. These social rights included rights to health, housing and education (included in articles 25 and 26 of the Universal Declaration). See Paolo G. Carozza, "From Conquest to Constitutions: Retrieving a Latin American Tradition of the Idea of Human Rights", *Human Rights Quarterly* 25:2 (May 2003), 281-313; Mary Ann Glendon, "The Forgotten Crucible: The Latin American

Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by United Nations member states in 1948, dozens of new and detailed international human rights norms and mechanisms have been created in response to grassroots movements' demands for greater political recognition. These include covenants on economic, social and cultural rights, torture, and forced disappearance.⁵⁶

How do we understand the legacy of human rights movements that have emerged out of struggles for social and economic justice and national liberation, and survived decades of authoritarianism and war? How do we understand the legacy of Colombia's human rights movements, which continue to function under precarious circumstances? The question of human rights and socio-political change deserves to be critically examined. According to legal scholar Stephen J. Toope, "...we do not know whether an enhanced status for human rights prompts fundamental social change. We certainly do not know what sort of changes might be promoted. We do not know because there is almost no research undertaken on this vital question".⁵⁷ In considering the history of human rights in the oil refining enclave of Barrancabermeja and its surrounding region, it is important to understand the dynamics of armed conflict in the region, which have had a formative impact on the national context. Kathryn Sikkink does not set out to consider the ways in which armed conflict shapes the political identities and behaviours of social

Influence on the Universal Human Rights Idea", *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16 (Spring 2003), 27-39.

⁵⁶ The convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide entered into international law in 1951. The "United Nations International Bill of Human Rights" includes the Universal Declaration, as well as two special covenants and two optional protocols that recognize economic, social and cultural rights, as well as the rights of peoples to self-determination.

⁵⁷ Stephen Toope, "Human Rights and Social Change" (Lecture presented at a meeting of the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, March 11, 2003).

movements and state institutions. And while she does focus on the power of human rights movements, she spends relatively little time discussing the origins of these movements. Greg Grandin's and Makau Mutua's contributions to the debate around human rights are essential reflections on the limited and oftentimes misleading promise of human rights. But does their approach disregard popular origins and interpretations of human rights? Are Baxi and Santos overly hopeful, their definition of social change too amorphous?

A New Paradigm of Social Protest

Human rights organizing in Barranca represented a new paradigm of protest. The year CREDHOS was founded, 1987, was one of the most violent in Colombia's history since the end of the internal armed conflict known as *La Violencia* in the early 1960s. The national media dubbed 1987 the "year of the dirty war".⁵⁸ That year an alarming escalation of political violence occurred at the national level, resulting in approximately 2,500 deaths and 200 forced disappearances. Official figures suggest that of the total number of dead in 1987, more than half were civilians killed outside of combat. Tallying approximately 150 murders per 100,000 people, Barranca's murder rate was nearly three times the national rate. In the midst of this crisis, Liberal President Virgilio Barco cast his government in the role of victim, insisting that criminal and subversive elements conspired to undermine Colombian institutions and attack the country's legitimate security forces. In contrast, human rights activists understood the "dirty war" as a state-sponsored campaign to eradicate social movements, unions and left-wing political parties.

⁵⁸ "1987, el año de la 'guerra sucia': más de 2.500 muertos," *El Mundo* (Medellín, Antioquia), December 28, 1987.

Since the late 1980s the primary focus of trade union and social movement activists in Barrancabermeja and across Colombia has been the defence of basic human rights, defined mainly in terms of freedom from violence associated with armed conflict, including murder, torture and arbitrary arrest or detention.⁵⁹ Human rights activism was a direct response to the escalation of political violence, particularly abuses committed by state security agents and their paramilitary allies. The adoption of human rights discourse by activists in Barranca, and elsewhere in Colombia, set the tone for the next quarter century. Because of their efforts, human rights became the lens through which the Colombian conflict is viewed, and the basis upon which political change is contested. By 1988 human rights was the number one reason for social protest in Colombia.⁶⁰

According to some estimates, between 1989 and 1994 the total number of human rights organizations in Colombia increased by nearly 400 per cent.⁶¹ As Winifred Tate writes: “Confronted with the complex panorama of Colombian violence, activists began using the human rights framework to classify the violent homicides that years earlier had been considered partisan violence, or part of insurgent and counterinsurgency campaigns”.⁶²

My research emerges from the intersection of social history and human rights; it intends to make an original contribution to the study of human rights and social

⁵⁹ Several human rights activists from Barranca have written undergraduate or graduate theses reflecting on local social, economic and political circumstances. See Juan de Dios Castilla Amell, “Participación popular y movimiento social: Barrancabermeja 1971-1985” (master’s thesis, Universidad de los Andes, 1989); Ubencil Duque Rojas, “Conflictos y paz, realidad y aprendizajes significativos en la Región del Magdalena Medio” (master’s thesis, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 2004); Jhon Jairo Londoño et al., “Estudio económico-social de Barrancabermeja 1977-1988” (undergraduate thesis, Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia, 1991).

⁶⁰ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 235.

⁶¹ Edward L. Cleary, *The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997), 63.

⁶² Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 71.

movements in situations of armed conflict, as well as to debates about the importance and impact of human rights activism in late twentieth century Latin America. The main aim of the dissertation is to better understand the social origins of human rights movements. In writing the history of a specific human rights movement in a conflict area, I consider three sets of broad historical questions. What social, political and economic conditions give rise to human rights movements? How do human rights movements relate to trade union and social movements? The second set of questions revolves around the historical changes set in motion by the advancement of human rights. What is the relationship between social and political activism and human rights? Do human rights movements create new channels of popular participation? Do they encourage solidarity within communities, and between diverse social and political actors? Or do human rights movements displace or undermine existing struggles for change? The third set of questions concerns the special problems that face human rights activists in conflict areas. How do governments, state security forces and non-state armed actors perceive and behave towards human rights movements in contexts of internal armed conflict? Can human rights movements maintain their critical integrity and effectiveness in the face of these pressures?

The transnational activist networks that were the focus of Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's seminal work, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, are in fact comprised of three levels of interaction between individual activists and groups. At the transnational level, well-funded international NGOs work alongside community-based groups linked to progressive faith communities, committees comprised of refugees from violence-affected regions, trade unions,

governments and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and Organization of American States (OAS). Keck and Sikkink have been primarily interested in human rights work that takes place at this level, and the ability of transnational networks to affect relations between states. Shifting to the national level, Winifred Tate has examined the activities and cultures of Colombian human rights activist networks and their interactions with government and military authorities. Tate has significantly expanded the model proposed by Keck and Sikkink to look at the direct actions taken by national non-governmental organizations to impact the behaviour of the Colombian government, state security forces, and non-state armed groups. Moving to the third, previously unstudied level, my dissertation aims to look at the scope and impact of actions undertaken by human rights activist networks at the local level. In this dissertation I have sought to learn from activists who daily interact with state bureaucracies, security forces and illegal armed groups. I conducted oral interviews with social movement leaders and made use of the hitherto unexamined archives held by the Regional Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), amongst other sources. This local, bottom-up approach is important if we are to better understand how human rights networks have emerged from union and social movements in Latin America. Indeed, the world's best known human rights advocacy organizations, from Amnesty International to United Nations, all rely on the information and analysis produced by local activists such as those working in Barrancabermeja.

The Importance of Barranca

Every day thousands of people travel to and from Barrancabermeja by boat. Water taxis known as *chalupas* and low-slung motorized canoes known as *johnsons* buzz and skip across the great Magdalena River in the shadow of Colombia's largest oil refinery. Concrete ramparts extend for nearly two kilometres along the shore. Before reaching the city, small vessels originating in Puerto Wilches, Puerto Berrío, Simití, or other small towns along the river may be subject to searches by guerrillas, paramilitaries or Colombian security forces. At the naval checkpoint just north of the city travellers are questioned, their names registered in a logbook, their identification cards checked and their bags inspected. Since the earliest days of the Tropical Oil Company, Barranca has also been connected to the outside world by air. When you arrive by plane from Bogotá, the first thing that hits you is the heat. Humidity fills the cabin of the Avianca Airlines twin propeller Fokker 50 as you descend toward the lush valley below. Barranca has an average temperature of 30 degrees centigrade, but the mercury often exceeds 45 degrees by midday. Unlike the coastal areas of Colombia, Barranca is bathed in thick wet air. Barranca is located approximately 500 kilometres from the sea. There is scarcely any breeze, and the leaves hang motionless on the trees. The groaning, silt-laden Magdalena River affords little respite.

This dissertation focuses on the history of Colombia's most important oil refinery town and centre of social activism, which in the late 1980s gave birth to a combative and influential human rights movement. Colombia has been an oil-producing nation since the

1920s and a major net exporter of oil since the 1980s.⁶³ Barranca is home to Colombia's largest oil refinery, as well as being a longstanding centre of oil drilling. More than 70 per cent of Colombia's crude oil is processed at the vast state-owned Ecopetrol complex that sits on the banks of the Magdalena River. Barrancabermeja is located in a hot and humid lowland region known as the Magdalena Medio that includes parts of seven Colombian provinces, or *departamentos*.⁶⁴ This thesis takes into account the history of the city of Barrancabermeja and the surrounding region because of the interaction between urban and rural social movements, as well as the movement of peoples and the varied forms of political violence between both urban and rural spheres. The Magdalena Medio is known as a frontier area of homesteaders, migrant labourers, refugees from civil wars and non-state armed groups, including both Marxist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries. In Colombia, frontier areas are generally thought of as being beyond the reach of the state, yet in the Magdalena Medio a peculiar form of state presence has evolved, due to the strategic importance of oil to national development and the export economy. As we shall see, the ways in which the state impinged upon the region shaped the social movements that emerged.

For more than five decades Colombia has been embroiled in what is now most commonly described simply as “*el Conflicto*”. It is somewhat misleading to speak of ‘The Violence’ or ‘The Conflict’ in the singular. Regional approaches to Colombian history reveal that multiple forms of social and political violence occur simultaneously, in

⁶³ By 1999 oil accounted for 32 per cent of the total value of exports. Jenny Pearce, “Beyond the Perimeter Fence: Oil and Armed Conflict in Casanare, Colombia” (occasional paper, Center for the Study of Global Governance, London School of Economics, June 2004), 8-11.

⁶⁴ Santander, Cesar, Bolívar, Antioquia, Boyacá, Caldas and Cundinamarca.

different configurations. These patterns are shaped by developments in national and transnational politics or economics, such as peace processes between guerrillas and the national government, the growth of drug trafficking, the expansion of extractive industries, or increases in military assistance from the United States. A regional approach allows us to look at the confluence of local, national and international forces that shape the identities and behaviours of social actors.⁶⁵

I trace the history of social protest that culminated in a movement for human rights in the late 1980s in Colombia's oil capital. This dissertation aims to understand the historical logic of social movements within a region that became a major area of political violence in the latter half of the twentieth century. My research is distinguished from previous work on the history of oil enclaves in two key ways. First, I recount the history of Barrancabermeja from the perspective of both oil workers and local residents who are not directly employed by the oil industry. Second, I focus on the emergence of a human rights movement, and the way in which social movements are shaped by armed conflict.

Most historical studies of the oil industry in Latin America are economic and political.⁶⁶ There are only a handful of outstanding studies that take a social history approach. These works look at oil in the context of class formation, economic development, regional identity, environmental change and political revolution: all major themes in the history of Barrancabermeja. However, none of the previously written studies cast social movements as protagonists of the processes of historical change.

⁶⁵ Mary Roldán, Eduardo Posada-Carbó, Nancy Appelbaum, Catherine LeGrand, Marcelo Bucheli, Aline Helg, and Charles Bergquist have all demonstrated the value of writing Colombian history from a regional perspective.

⁶⁶ Jonathan C. Brown and Alan Knight, eds., *The Mexican Petroleum Industry in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

Miguel Tinker Salas' *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* and Myrna Santiago's *Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* are partial exceptions to this pattern.⁶⁷ Tinker Salas takes a broad view of the "oil enclave", examining life within oil company camps themselves, as well as the impact of the oil industry on local communities in the Lake Maracaibo district. Santiago looks at the interaction between the oil industry and the natural environment, as well as oil workers' participation in the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917. Another notable exception is Colombian historian Mauricio Archila's 1978 book *Aqui nadie es forastero: Testimonios sobre la formación de una cultura radical Barrancabermeja, 1920-1950*, which uses oral history to explore the origins of popular political radical culture in Barrancabermeja during the Tropical Oil Company years. Inspired by the work of Tinker-Salas, Santiago and Archila, my dissertation links the issues of oil, labour, politics, violence and human rights over nearly a century of local and national history. The history of popular protest constitutes a key field of social memory in Barranca.⁶⁸

To understand how human rights activism became central to the contestation of power in Barranca, it is important to understand the circumstances that gave rise to political violence in the city and surrounding region. The forms of violence that took

⁶⁷ See Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009) and Myrna Santiago, *Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶⁸ The concept of social memory is attributed to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that social groups or communities may develop "agreed upon" versions of the past by means of public communication and the sharing of stories. This contrasts with an understanding of memory as constructed through "private remembrance". Jacob C. Climo and Maria G. Catelli, eds., *Social History and Memory: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 4. For further reading on social memory and activism, see Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastuli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

shape in the Magdalena Medio region reflected the special role that the national state has played in the history of Barrancabermeja. The history of the industrial enclave of Barrancabermeja is the history of a decades-long struggle for democracy, social justice, regional and national economic development, and human rights. Because of oil, Barranca has been the site of direct and protracted confrontation between the state and progressive social movements. Barranca has been a staging ground for both insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. The events described in this dissertation had a major impact on the way in which the Colombian conflict has been fought, and the way in which Colombian citizens have organized to resist violence and terror. Drawing on extensive oral interviews and archival research, I situate the experiences of human rights defenders in the oil enclave of Barrancabermeja within the broader history of Colombian social movements and the Colombian armed conflict.

Dissertation Summary

This dissertation explores why and how people living in conflict areas organise collectively to assert human rights. The period under consideration is 1919-1993. This dissertation is divided into three sections. In the first section, I discuss the development of Barranca as a foreign-controlled enclave through to the end of *La Violencia* (1919-1961). The second section, which is divided into two chapters, explores the transition to national control of the oil industry and the emergence of new social movements against the backdrop of the Cold War and left-wing guerrilla insurgency (1961-1980). In the third section, which is divided into four chapters, I look in-depth at the advent of human rights activism in response to paramilitary violence (1980-1993). The epilogue surveys

the process of paramilitarization that Barrancabermeja endured between 1998 and 2002, and its aftermath. This final section sums up the possibilities and limitations of human rights organizing in a conflict zone from the point of view of frontline human rights activists.

PART I: Foreign Enclave (1919-1961)

CHAPTER 1

Oil Workers, *Colonos* and the Roots of Radical Political Culture

Most cities have a symbol that represents them: Paris, the Eiffel Tower; Rome, Saint Peter's Basilica; Zipaquirá, the Salt Cathedral; Bogotá, Monserrate and Barrancabermeja, the refinery. But for me, for those of us who have lived many years in Barrancabermeja, there is something even more singular: the factory siren. How do you paint the sound of a factory siren and create a symbol for a city like this? Maybe Picasso would have known how, but he is dead.¹

Aristóbulo Quiroga, oil worker

Introduction: Rebel City

Barrancabermeja has long suffered a bad reputation. It is known as a place of hard work, transgression and violence. At the time of the oil boom in the 1920s, adventurous young men went to Barranca to make and spend money. If they did not succumb to illness or get run out of town for participating in a strike, employees of the Tropical Oil Company might stay long enough to tell their stories to the next generation of *tropeleros*, or rabble-rousers. Young women also went to Barranca, and many gained employment in the sex trade. In her novel *The Dark Bride*, Laura Restrepo writes:

Back then [Barranca] was distinguished in the great vastness of the outside world as the city of the three p's: that is *putas*, *plata* and *petróleo*, that is whores, money, and oil. *Petróleo*, *plata* and *putas*. Four p's really, if we remember that it was paradise in the middle of a land besieged by hunger.²

¹Originally published in the oil workers' union newspaper *El Frente Obrero*. Aristóbulo Quiroga. "El Pito de la Troco", in Alfonso Torres Duarte, ed., *Barrancabermeja en Textos e Imágenes* (Barrancabermeja: Alcaldía de Barrancabermeja, 1997), 69.

²Laura Restrepo, *The Dark Bride* Trans. Stephen Lytle (Toronto: Harper Flamingo Canada, 2002), 2.

According to an old joke, Barranca was little more than a brothel, presided over by a mayor and a priest. *Un burdel, con alcalde y cura.*³ Throughout its history, Barranca has also been stigmatized for its association with revolutionary politics. Young conscripts from Barranca fulfilling their military service worry they will be accused of being *guerrilleros* and mistreated by their superiors. Pregnant women have been said to leave the city to give birth in nearby Bucaramanga, so that their children's national identity cards do not indicate they were born in Barranca. The mere mention of Barranca raises eyebrows across Colombia. As if in Barranca the untamed, the poor and the Communists would eat you for lunch.

For many people, Barrancabermeja also holds a singular mystique. *Barranca tiene mística.* Barranca is full of life. The people are exuberant. In his essay based on oral histories collected in Barrancabermeja in the 1970s, *Aquí nadie es forastero*, Mauricio Archila describes Barranca as an open and welcoming place, whose citizens are deeply conscious of their place in Colombian history:

As soon as you set foot in Barranca, you feel a special atmosphere, maybe unique in Colombia. It is not the heat exactly, or the Magdalena River... or the relative proximity of the Atlantic Ocean, or the rarified air produced by the permanent combustion of gases derived from petroleum. It is more than that; it is the spirit of the people. It is the warm welcome that they give to visitors, it is the thirst for learning, the pride of living in the oil capital of Colombia.⁴

The city's social movements occupy a key place in this mythology. In Barranca there are few traces of the customary deference to authority and the country club politics of the *sierra*, the conservative Catholic morality of Antioquia, the tight webs of economic and

³ Jacques Aprile-Gnisset, *Génesis de Barrancabermeja: Ensayo* (Bucaramanga: Instituto Universitario de la Paz, Departamento de Ciencias Políticas, 1997), 215.

⁴ Archila, *Aquí nadie es forastero*, 109.

political clientelism of the *eje cafetero*, or the conspicuous racial divisions of the Pacific coast and Urabá.⁵

When the Tropical Oil Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil of New Jersey, began drilling for oil at Barrancabermeja in 1919, it set in motion powerful processes of economic, social and political change. During this period *barranqueños* from different walks of life came to identify as members of an imagined community of independent-minded and progressive working-class Colombians.⁶ In this chapter I discuss four linked historical processes: the colonization of the Magdalena Medio region leading up to the oil boom of the 1920s; the arrival of the Tropical Oil Company and the invention of the city of Barrancabermeja; the conflicts that pitted oil workers and other residents against the Tropical Oil Company; and the transition to state control over Tropical Oil holdings through the end of the 1950s.

Even prior to the arrival of the Tropical Oil Company, the Magdalena River valley around Barrancabermeja was an area of indigenous resistance, peasant struggles over land and a refuge for Liberal fighters from the nineteenth century civil wars. The development of an oil industry by foreign investors resulted in the formation of a new working class of migrant labourers, represented by a combative and fiercely nationalist

⁵ If migrants from Santander, the department where Barranca is located, are a major influence in Barranca's origins, the city is strongly identified with its Caribbean roots. The most emblematic food of Barranca is *sancocho de pescado*, a fish stew from the Caribbean coast that is served at restaurants along the municipal wharf, as well as at political rallies, protests and picket lines. The most popular and traditional music of the Magdalena Medio are the *vallenato* and *tamboras*, both Caribbean-Colombian forms. For further reading on music and popular culture of the Caribbean coast and Magdalena River, see Peter Wade, *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

union. From the 1920s through the 1940s a succession of strikes pitted oil workers against “La Troco”. Like other frontier areas, the Magdalena Medio region had no important local oligarchy, and a relatively weak presence of the Catholic Church. Throughout this early history the presence of the Colombian state was manifest mainly in security concerns, including the deployment of national police and army troops to safeguard the oil industry. Left-wing political identifications in the region culminated in 1948 with an armed uprising known as *la Comuna de Barrancabermeja*, the Barrancabermeja Commune.

Settlement of the Magdalena Medio: *Conquistadores, Colonos and Capitalists*

The early history of the tropical lowland region now known as the Magdalena Medio was one of dispersed indigenous populations and sparse Spanish settlement. In the nineteenth century, *mestizo* and mulatto homesteaders drawn to the area by export booms in forest products led to the growth of peasant farming areas and small towns, both along the great Magdalena River and upland in the hills of Santander and Boyacá. The Magdalena Medio later provided refuge for popular Liberals following their loss of Colombia’s deadliest nineteenth century civil conflict, the Thousand Days’ War (1899-1902).⁷ The state adjudicated land disputes, enforced public order and worked with the

⁷ For further reading on the Thousand Days’ War, see Gonzalo Sánchez and Mario Aguilera, eds., *Memoria de un país en Guerra: los mil días 1899-1902* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2001) and Charles Bergquist, *Café y conflicto en Colombia, 1886-1910: la guerra de los mil días, sus antecedentes y consecuencias* (Medellín: Fondo Rotatorio de Publicaciones, FAES, 1981).

Catholic Church toward the assimilation of the native population.⁸ During the colonial period, however, the region remained unconquered.

In April 1536, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, an Andalusian lawyer with no military experience, led an ambitious expedition up the Magdalena River. Inspired by Francisco Pizarro's conquest of the Inca capital of Cuzco, the governor of the Canary Islands, Pedro Fernández de Lugo, personally financed a plan to explore and claim new territory in what was then known as Nueva Granada. Jiménez de Quesada acted as lieutenant general of the large and well-equipped force that left Santa Cruz de Tenerife in November 1535. They arrived in the port city of Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast of Nueva Granada in January 1536. Three months later, Jiménez de Quesada would lead 900 men up the Río Grande de la Magdalena in search of gold, territory and Indians to conquer. Jiménez de Quesada's force was comprised of 800 Spaniards and 100 African and Indian slaves. About 500 of the men travelled overland by foot and horseback from Santa Marta, and another 400 sailed and rowed upriver in five custom-built brigantines.⁹

The journey from the Caribbean coast would prove costly, in financial and in human terms. The ground troops left first, laden with heavy weapons and supplies, and were followed two weeks later by the ships. The first attempt to sail up the Magdalena River was scuppered by a storm that struck just as the Spaniards' shallow-bottomed ships approached the mouth of the river.¹⁰ Two vessels sank, the other three were damaged,

⁸ The term *colono* can be translated into English as 'settler' or 'homesteader' to describe migrants who establish themselves in rural areas, often on public land.

⁹ J. Michael Francis, ed., *Invading Colombia: Spanish Accounts of the Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada Expedition of Conquest* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 35.

¹⁰ Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez has recounted harrowing journeys across the wide mouth of the Magdalena River, which he describes as having "an oceanic

and many of the survivors deserted. Jiménez de Quesada was forced to return to Santa Marta to regroup, acquire new ships, and recruit new men. Six months later he was ready to continue, and soon met up with the ground forces at a previously arranged rendezvous point 150 miles upstream.¹¹ After two more months Jiménez de Quesada and his men arrived at a small native settlement they came to refer to as “Barrancas Bermejas”, after the red earth that coloured the shoreline.¹² Since setting out from Santa Marta, about 200 men had died, mostly from illness and exhaustion.

While the majority of the remaining Spanish troops stopped at Barranca Bermejas to wait out heavy rains, Jiménez de Quesada sent small groups of men further upriver and inland in search of passage to the mountains. Jiménez de Quesada had been informed by local peoples about the impressive wealth and power of the Indians who lived beyond the nearby hills. Another 200 Spaniards died while they waited in the stifling heat at Barranca. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdéz, the official historiographer of the Indies, would later give an account of the trials and triumphs of the voyage. In one passage he writes of a thick black tar that “boiled and flowed out of the earth” that the local indigenous people used for medicinal purposes, and the Spanish used to repair their

temperament”. Gabriel García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale* Trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Vintage International, 2003), 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 36.

¹² The historical place names attributed to Barrancabermeja require some clarification. “La Tora” is said to be the original name given by local Yareguíes native peoples to the small village located on the site where Barrancabermeja is located. In the historiography of the conquest, the names “Cuatro Bocas”, “Barranca Bermeja” and “Infantas” are also used. The name “Infantas” is said to have been Jiménez’ tribute to María and Juana, the daughters of Carlos I of Spain. In 1868 Barranca would be officially renamed Puerto Santander, after the Colombian leader of the war of independence against Spain. Throughout this dissertation I use the name Barrancabermeja, or simply Barranca.

boats.¹³ But it was little more than a curiosity at the time. The advance patrols that had been dispatched by Jiménez de Quesada returned three months later with a few bags of salt and a minor quantity of gold. They also brought back news that there were indeed prosperous Indian settlements further to the south, located on a fertile and temperate plateau. This was sufficient to encourage further exploration. By the time Jiménez de Quesada left Barrancabermeja in January 1537, there were just 179 men remaining out of 900. Remarkably, Jiménez de Quesada's mission persisted until April 27, 1537, when he reached the Muisca city that he would name Santa Fé de Bogotá.¹⁴

Until the oil boom in the 1920s, Barranca remained little more than a footnote to the story of Jiménez de Quesada's conquest of Colombia. The Magdalena River was linked to the port city of Cartagena by means of the 118-kilometre Dique Canal in 1582. But a lack of resources for maintenance caused the canal to fall into disrepair.¹⁵ It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the Magdalena Medio was opened to international trade in quina, tagua, rubber, wood-based dyes and charcoal.¹⁶ Colombia is a country of distinct regions divided by high mountain ranges and dense forests. The trade in tropical forest products required no infrastructure beyond basic transportation, and minimum labour costs. As historian Frank Safford writes, in an "undercapitalized, sparsely populated country" such as Colombia, the trade in forest products "made

¹³ As quoted in Rafael Gómez Picón, *Magdalena, río de Colombia* 7th ed. (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1983), 213.

¹⁴ Francis, *Invading Colombia*, 84.

¹⁵ For further information, see Gustavo Bell Lemus, "El canal del Dique 1810-1840: el viacrucis de Cartagena", *Boletín Cultural y Geográfico* 26:21 (1989), 15-23.

¹⁶ Also known as vegetable ivory, tagua is the seed of a palm species used in the making of buttons and jewellery. Also known as cinchona, quina is the bark of a plant from which the alkaloid quinine is derived, for treatment of malaria. See Frank R. Safford. "Commerce and Enterprise in Central Colombia, 1821-1870" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1965), 270.

sense”.¹⁷ Few profits stayed in the region, and the jobs acquired by local *colonos* were precarious. From the perspective of the cash-strapped and isolated government in Bogotá, frontier areas such as the Magdalena Medio were a dilemma: though rich in natural resources, they were extremely difficult to access and nearly impossible to govern. As historian Sabine MacCormack writes, Colombian elites and foreign visitors alike distinguished between the “civilized” highlands where most white people lived, and the “savage” lowland areas inhabited by unassimilated native groups: “North American and European traveler-writers who trekked into the interior of Colombia left discouraging impressions of exotic Indians and hostile landscapes, impeding scientific expeditions and economic progress”.¹⁸

Colombia’s national economic and political integration would depend upon the conquest of frontier areas by private interests, rather than the state. Settlement along the Magdalena River was encouraged with the advent of steam navigation in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ In 1836 the first permanent trail was opened between the highland town of Simacota and the Opón River, a tributary of the Magdalena River that runs just south of Barrancabermeja.²⁰ The muddy port town of Barrancabermeja served as a local transportation hub, connected to the region’s farms and market centres by river and mule

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sabine MacCormack, “Ethnography in South America: The First Two hundred Years,” in Frank Salomon and Stuart B. Schwartz, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas . Vol. III South America Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 173.

¹⁹ In 1824 German investor Johan Bernard Elbers was granted a 20-year monopoly on steam navigation. Roland E. Duncan. “William Wheelright and Early Steam Navigation in the Pacific 1820-1840,” *The Americas*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (October 1975), 261.

²⁰ Alejo Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano: colonización y conflicto armado* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP, 1992), 31.

track.²¹ A census taken by the Colombian government in 1864 counted just 85 residents in Barranca, most of them adult men.²² In 1868, Barrancabermeja was designated a *corregimiento* under the jurisdiction of the municipality of San Vicente de Chucurí, and formally renamed Puerto Santander.²³

As the tagua, quina and charcoal trades grew in the late nineteenth century, there was pressure on the Colombian state to ensure the confidence of homesteaders and investors in the region.²⁴ Among *colonos*' greatest concerns were acquiring property rights, road building and the belligerence of the local native population. In the late nineteenth century the total population of Carib-speaking Yareguíes peoples living in the area was nearly 5,000. Non-indigenous *colonos* clashed with indigenous people over land. Indigenous warriors retaliated by ambushing non-indigenous traders on the road linking Barranca and the highlands.²⁵ The government of the department of Santander worked with the Catholic Church to ensure the pacification of the Yareguíes. The Yareguíes were semi-nomadic hunters, divided into five *cacicazgos*, or chiefdoms. But by the turn of the twentieth century they had been forcibly resettled into two *reducciones*

²¹ Rafael Antonio Velásquez R. and Victor Julio Castillo L., "Resistencia de la etnia Yareguíes a las políticas de reducción y 'civilización' en el siglo XIX," *Historia y Sociedad* 12 (November 2006), 285-320.

²² Aprile-Gnisset, *Genesis de Barrancabermeja*, 48.

²³ The Colombian national territory is divided into large political jurisdictions known as *departamentos*, analogous to U.S. states or Canadian provinces. The designation *departamento* has been used since the adoption of the 1886 Constitution. *Departamentos* are represented by a governor and departmental assembly. *Municipios* are subdivisions of *departamentos* analogous to U.S. or Canadian counties or townships. *Municipios* are represented by mayors and municipal councils, and may include large cities, but many are mostly rural. *Corregimientos* are rural subdivisions of *municipios*. *Corregimientos* may include villages or areas of settlement known as *veredas*, but do not have a large enough population to qualify as *municipios*.

²⁴ Catherine LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest in Colombia 1850-1936* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 41.

²⁵ Velásquez and Castillo, "Resistencia de la etnia Yareguíes," 313.

run by Catholic missionaries, and instructed in the Spanish language and religion. This allowed the government of the department of Santander to secure the road between the highlands and the river.²⁶

The economic development of the region in the latter half of the nineteenth century was brisk at times, but uneven and poorly integrated. In the mid-nineteenth century the central lowland valley of the Magdalena River experienced a short-lived tobacco boom. Beginning in the 1860s, coffee exports encouraged investment and settlement in highland Santander.²⁷ In 1875 Cuban engineer and developer Javier Jaime Cisneros built the riverport town of Puerto Berrío with funds from the regional government of the department of Antioquia. Although Puerto Berrío was connected to the city of Medellín by rail in 1893, it never developed into a major regional economic centre.²⁸ In the early 1880s the Colombian quina trade was briefly centred in Santander. It is estimated that between 1879 and 1883 an estimated 7,000 quina harvesters, or *cascarilleros*, descended on an area to the west of the Suárez River, located in the

²⁶ The current borders of the department of Santander were drawn in 1910. From 1857-1886 the territory was known as the Estado de Santander and from 1886-1910 it was known as El Gran Santander (and included the current departamento of Norte de Santander).

²⁷ For further reading on coffee in Santander, see Charles Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978).

²⁸ Hernán Horna, *Transportation Modernization and Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth Century Colombia: Cisneros and Friends* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Historica Upsaliensia 172, 1992), 60.

foothills of the Cordillera Central.²⁹ Like tagua, tobacco and other ephemera of the nineteenth century, the quina trade was destined to boom and bust.³⁰

The people who lived along the stretch of Colombia's largest navigable river between Puerto Boyacá to the south and Morales to the north experienced processes of social and political conflict related to economic cycles and competition for resources between homesteaders, indigenous peoples and larger interests.³¹ As historian Catherine LeGrand writes, the development of the region can be understood as part of larger trends of new settlement, exploitation and conflict in frontier zones across Latin America:

The frontier zones were sparsely inhabited and usually not held in private ownership. They were waste or public lands belonging to the national or local government. (...) In the occupation of these areas, conflicts over access to land and control of labour broke out between peasant settlers and large-scale land entrepreneurs.³²

In the area around Barrancabermeja in the first decade of the twentieth century *colonos* working in the *tagua* trade reported being forced to sign contracts with the powerful Barranquilla-registered company Ogliastri and Martínez Lumber Company, or face

²⁹ For a description of the processes and politics of harvesting quina bark, see Joanne Rappaport. *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* Second Revised Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 104-111.

³⁰ The decline of the quina trade and the fall in coffee prices contributed to the outbreak of civil war in Santander and western Cundinamarca in 1885. Colombian dependence on export products was a major point of concern for national and regional political leaders at the time, as was the social instability caused by speculators' reckless forays into the tropical forest products trade. See historian Malcolm Deas' essay on the 1885 civil war in the region. Malcolm Deas, *Del poder y la gramática, y otros ensayos sobre historia, política y literatura colombianas* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, 1993), 121-173.

³¹ David Church Johnson, "Social and Economic Change in Nineteenth-Century Santander, Colombia" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1975).

³² LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion*, xiii.

eviction or imprisonment.³³ The *colonos* fought a long legal battle against company representative and Bucaramanga businessman Victor Manuel Ogliastri. Settlers in the region followed a national trend by seeking to have the lands they occupied recognized as *terrenos baldíos*, or public property. This was a direct challenge to the Ogliastri and Martínez hegemony. In 1911 the national government resolved the dispute in the settlers' favour. The *colonos* celebrated their victory by stoning the company offices and threatening to kill a local manager. In 1913 the Magdalena Commercial Company, a U.S.-owned export conglomerate, bought a substantial parcel of land from Ogliastri and Martínez, thus reversing the settlers' victory and establishing the first modern multinational corporate presence in the region.³⁴

Amongst the first waves of Colombians of European and *mestizo* descent to colonize the lowland areas of Santander in the vicinity of Barranca were defeated Liberal soldiers and their families displaced during the Thousand Days' War (1898-1902).³⁵ Many important battles had been fought in the department of Santander.³⁶ The single most infamous incident of the war was the Battle of Palonegro, which took place on the western outskirts of the city of Bucaramanga in May 1900. The battle lasted two weeks and claimed the lives of an estimated 2,500 to 4,000 soldiers. Palonegro marked the defeat of the unified Liberal rebel army, leading to a period of guerrilla warfare carried out by small bands of Liberals throughout Santander. Internal refugees, many of whom

³³ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ministerio de Industrias, Departamento de Baldíos, tomo 33, folios 156-159. Petition: colonos to Ministerio de Obras Públicas (August 6, 1910).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 35.

³⁶ David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 150.

were armed and aggrieved, were drawn to the valley to the west of Bucaramanga by the availability of public or unclaimed arable land, and the natural protection afforded by the complex topography of mountains, ravines and swamps. Their outlook on politics was stubbornly anti-authoritarian. In the aftermath of war, settlers organized themselves into armed “self-defense” militia. The persistence of an independent spirit amongst the colonists earned the region a reputation as a “red zone”, or an area inhabited by political radicals.³⁷ The new *colonos* cleared and worked the land, and they viewed encroachment by foreign or absentee investors with suspicion.

The Magdalena Medio region was thus not a *tabula rasa* prior to the oil boom of the 1920s. While the area was sparsely settled, it was already a well-known sanctuary for homesteaders and internal refugees. By this time, the majority of Yareguíes peoples had been systematically assimilated or killed.³⁸ National and regional governments intervened to settle settlers’ disputes with wealthy business interests, but otherwise were not present. This pattern of selective state intercession in local affairs in response to conflict between the local population and private interests would continue through the Tropical Oil Company era.

The Arrival of the Oilmen

Oil has ensured Barrancabermeja’s prominent place in Colombian history. Early in the twentieth century, foreign entrepreneurs began to show an interest in the exploitation of oil in Colombia. In 1905 French-born Colombian engineer Roberto De

³⁷ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 35.

³⁸ Velásquez and Castillo, “Resistencia de la etnia Yareguíes”, 315.

Mares ventured into the Magdalena Medio region in search of rubber.³⁹ While in the area of Barrancabermeja, he arranged to meet a local entrepreneur named José Joaquín Bohórquez. Bohórquez was looking for a partner to help him start an oil business.⁴⁰ Oil was in such abundance that it literally seeped up out of the earth and formed large black pools. Along with Bohórquez and a Barranquilla-based investment firm, Roberto De Mares purchased the rights to exploit oil resources within a 1.5 million acre parcel of land. He retained the rights for a period 30 years from the commencement of drilling.⁴¹ His initiative led to Colombia's first oil boom and the creation of the industrial enclave of Barrancabermeja.

The purchase of the "De Mares Concession" was made facilitated in part by Roberto De Mares' friendship with Conservative President General Rafael Reyes. President Reyes approved the deal by decree, invoking emergency measures to sidestep the usual congressional consultation processes.⁴² From 1904 to 1909 President Reyes presided over a politically divided and economically ruined Colombia. The Thousand Days' War (1899-1902) and the loss of Panama (1903) had devastated the country. President Reyes believed that the state should play a larger role in encouraging the

³⁹ Wild or uncultivated rubber was being exploited in the Magdalena Medio on a small scale and on a large scale in the Putumayo in Colombia's southeastern jungles. Roger Casement, an Irish Republican and advocate for the human rights of colonized peoples in Africa and the Americas, documented the abuses imposed on native Huitoto people by rubber traders in the Putumayo in the 1900-1920 period. For a compilation of Casement's journals and correspondence from the Putumayo, see Angus Mitchel, ed., *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* (London: Anaconda Editions, 1997).

⁴⁰ "The Reward of a Petroleum Adventure," *The Lamp*, August 1926.

⁴¹ The same year another oil concession was purchased in northeastern Colombia by General Virgilio Barco, but these lands were even more isolated than Barranca and would remain undeveloped for more than 50 years.

⁴² Law 30 of 1903 specified that all subsoil rights pertaining to coal and oil exploitation had to be approved by Congress. See Jorge Villegas, *Petróleo, oligarquía e imperio* (Bogotá: Áncora, 1982), 16.

development of the export economy and was nicknamed *el modernizador* by his admirers.⁴³ He undertook fiscal reforms that increased state revenues, serviced Colombia's foreign debt, subsidized new industries, built railways, and sought foreign investments in oil and bananas.⁴⁴

The global oil boom that began during the First World War, combined with a desire to diversify sources of oil in Latin America beyond Mexico, drove British and United States oil companies to seek out opportunities in South America.⁴⁵ In 1917 the revolutionary government of Mexico passed a new constitution that proclaimed all subsoil the property of the Mexican state. Standard Oil of New Jersey was monitoring Colombian investment opportunities at around the same time. In 1913 the company had lobbied the government of President Carlos Restrepo to block British industrialist Weetman Pearson's bid to buy the exclusive rights to prospect for oil in an area roughly half the size of the country.⁴⁶ While Colombia was experiencing a major boom in coffee exports, it lagged behind most Latin American countries in terms of per capita economic output and infrastructural development.⁴⁷ In the 1915-19 period, coffee represented 54 per cent of total exports.⁴⁸ Banana exports were also increasing in this period, due

⁴³ Marcelo Bucheli, *Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 88.

⁴⁴ Humberto Vélez., "Rafael Reyes: Quinquenio, régimen político y capitalismo", *Nueva historia de Colombia* Vol. III (Bogotá: Planeta Colombiana, 1989), 199.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Brown, *Oil and Revolution in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 239.

⁴⁶ Pearson owned the subsoil rights to what was at the time recognized as one of the world's largest oilfields, Mexico's Potrero del Llano. Marcelo Bucheli, "Negotiating under the Monroe Doctrine: Weetman Pearson and the Origins of U.S. Control of Colombian Oil," *Business History Review*, 82:3 (Autumn 2008), 529-557.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 534.

⁴⁸ William Paul McGreevey, *An Economic History of Colombia 1845-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 207.

mainly to the investments made by the Boston-based United Fruit Company in the department of Magdalena on the Caribbean coast. It had been nearly two decades since the end of the Thousand Days' War and the economy was growing. But the Colombian government was still in need of foreign direct investment.⁴⁹

The arrival of foreign capital renewed conflicts over land in the Magdalena Medio region. Roberto De Mares' first international partners were J.S. Weller and John W. Leonard, both experienced oilmen based in the booming steel-producing city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Together with De Mares they raised \$2 million U.S. towards the creation of the Tropical Oil Company, incorporated in 1916. In 1918 *colonos* registered complaints about *terrenos baldíos* being unlawfully fenced by Colombian speculators seeking to rent public lands to the foreign oil company. Again in 1922 *colonos* complained about being forced off their lands. Formal grievances were sent to the Ministry of Agriculture and Attorney General of Colombia, accusing Tropical Oil of destroying and ransacking settlers' homes. *Colonos* accused local authorities of acting as agents of the foreign oil company and against the interest of Colombian citizens.⁵⁰

Setting up an oil drilling infrastructure in Barrancabermeja was expensive, and required spectacular feats of engineering and human endurance. Though navigable for nearly 1,000 kilometres from Honda, in the department of Huila, to the Caribbean Sea at Bocas de Ceniza, the Magdalena River is shallow, fast moving, and subject to shifting

⁴⁹ At the time, the government was formed by a nominally independent third party called the Republican Union. The President, Carlos Restrepo, was in fact a Conservative. Following constitutional reforms in 1910 that guaranteed opposition parties representation in the Colombian Congress, President Restrepo had to weigh the benefits of foreign investment against nationalist perception that he might capitulate to foreign interests. See Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia*, 162.

⁵⁰ Aprile-Gnisset, *Génesis de Barrancabermeja*, 121.

channels, overgrowth of vegetation and flooding. Standard Oil historians George Gibb and Evelyn Knowlton write of Tropical Oil's initial travails in terms reminiscent of Jiménez de Quesada's journey of conquest several centuries earlier:

The search constituted one of the great epics of the oil industry. The De Mares concession itself was a wilderness – a land of steaming temperatures, unbelievable rainfalls, and none-too-friendly native tribes. Transportation facilities consisted of river boats and canoes, and the caprices of the Magdalena made navigation difficult.⁵¹

The only means of transporting heavy drilling, road building and construction equipment from North America to Barranca, and the oilfields that lay inland, was by ocean cargo vessel, train, and then river barge. The mouth of the Magdalena River near the port city of Barranquilla was impassable by ship due to the presence of large sandbars formed by silt brought down hundreds of kilometres from the Andes. Once delivered to Colombia's Caribbean coast, equipment had to be disassembled, transported across winding, uneven terrain by a rustic short-gauge railroad, and then unloaded onto slow moving barges that ploughed their way up the Magdalena River. Arriving at Barranca, the equipment then had to be dragged across deep gullies, shallow streams and extensive swamps.

The fledgling Tropical Oil Company exhausted its capital demonstrating the viability of the property. Three oil wells drilled in 1919 proved immediately productive.⁵² International Petroleum, a Canadian-based subsidiary of Standard Oil of

⁵¹ George S. Gibb and Evelyn H. Knowlton, *The Resurgent Years, 1911-1927: History of Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956), 369-370.

⁵² "The oil that had been waiting for so many years seemed impatient to be found. At 80 feet, the first barrel started to flow 50 barrels a day. When it was deepened to 2,260 feet it gushed 5,000 barrels. Two more wells flowed even more prolifically". Ruth Sheldon Knowles, *The Greatest Gamblers: The Epic of American Oil Exploration* 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 168.

New Jersey, formally agreed to buy Tropical Oil in August 1920 for \$33 million U.S.⁵³ Standard Oil of New Jersey was the largest petrochemical company in the world at the time.⁵⁴ By the mid 1920s Tropical Oil owned the largest modern shipping fleet in Colombia, including six large river steamers and a dozen or more barges. The company established six bulk stations and four distribution centres for delivering oil to major domestic markets. In 1926 work on a 530 kilometre pipeline between Barranca and Cartagena was completed. Annual production jumped from 66,750 barrels in 1921 to more than 1 million barrels in 1925 and more than 6 million barrels in 1926. The profits from oil in Colombia now surpassed those of precious metals and bananas. By 1930 annual oil production at Barranca exceeded 20 million barrels.⁵⁵ By the end of the first decade, Barranca was Standard Oil's largest overseas venture.⁵⁶

Standard Oil controlled all aspects of a transnational business that connected Barrancabermeja to the Caribbean coast, the United States and Canada. The first international shipment of crude oil from Barranca arrived in Montreal by tanker on August 8, 1926. The Tropical Oil Company was in charge of drilling and the Andian National Corporation in charge of transportation by pipeline to the Caribbean coast and beyond. The refinery in Montreal's industrial east end, which had been built in 1917,

⁵³ Gibb and Knowlton, *The Resurgent Years*, 371.

⁵⁴ In a landmark antitrust decision in 1911 the U.S. Supreme Court found Standard Oil to be monopolizing the oil business. John D. Rockefeller was then forced to dismember Standard Oil into dozens of smaller companies. Standard Oil of New Jersey remained the largest of these.

⁵⁵ Aprile-Gnisset, *Génesis de Barrancabermeja*, 150.

⁵⁶ Pamela Murray, "Know-How and Nationalism: Colombia's First Geological and Petroleum Experts, c. 1940 – 1970," *The Americas* 52:2 (October 1995), 213.

was owned and operated by Imperial Oil.⁵⁷ Imperial Oil, Andian National and Tropical Oil were all owned by Standard Oil of New Jersey, but registered in Canada. In the Colombian context it was a convenient way of avoiding accusations of U.S. imperialism. In 1926 many Colombians continued to harbour bitter feelings towards the United States regarding the loss of Panama in 1903.⁵⁸ On August 9, 1926 *The Globe and Mail* newspaper of Toronto declared “Canadians Conquer Tropical Obstacles to Secure Crude Oil”.⁵⁹ Sir Herbert Holt, chairman of the board of Andian National and president of the powerful Royal Bank of Canada, was on hand to open the valve emptying 90,000 barrels of Colombian crude. He remarked that the flow of oil from Colombia “under all-Canadian control” would make “the Dominion [of Canada] independent of foreign supplies of oil”.⁶⁰

The oil business was of major importance to Colombia’s economic future. Public investments in roads and railways, and the expansion of small and medium-scale manufacturing required fuel. The Colombian state drew a 10 per cent royalty from the wells exploited at Barranca and stood to take over production in 1946. While Tropical Oil and other international companies generally considered Colombian oil legislation to be unfavourable to investors because of “high taxes” and the 30-year limit placed on

⁵⁷ H. M. Grant, “Solving the Labour Problem at Imperial Oil”, *Canadian Working-Class History, Selected Readings* 3rd Ed. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2006), 232-252.

⁵⁸ In 1921 the Colombian government recognized its former territory of Panama as an independent country in exchange for \$25 million U.S. Some Colombians accused the U.S. government of utilizing negotiations around indemnization for Panama as leverage to pressure Colombia to grant concessions to American companies.

⁵⁹ “Canadians Conquer Tropical Obstacles to Secure Crude Oil,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), August 9, 1926.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

concessions, the prospects for oil exploitation far outweighed these concerns.⁶¹ Success begat imitation, and by the end of the 1930s foreign investments in the oil sector multiplied. By the start of World War II, Colombia was the world's eighth largest petroleum producer.⁶²

The Invention of Barrancabermeja

The city of Barrancabermeja was custom-built by the Tropical Oil Company as a secure base of operations for the extraction, refining and distribution of oil. The main townsite is located on the eastern shore of a wide stretch of the Magdalena River, surrounded by swampland and inaccessible by roads. There were no Colombian government authorities in place, no local elite, no professionals, and no Bishop. The Colombian workforce comprised mainly of *mestizos* from the department of Santander and mulattos from the Atlantic coast earned decent wages, but lived in cramped and overpriced accommodations, and were vulnerable to disease and exhaustion. They viewed the Tropical Oil Company and its large contingent of U.S. and Canadian managers, foremen and technicians with mistrust. The feeling was mutual, and the company invested a great deal of resources in security. The Colombian government assisted Tropical Oil by

⁶¹ The initial contract between Colombian-French engineer Roberto De Mares and the Colombian government stipulated that the state would receive 15 per cent of total production. The amount was changed to 10 per cent when the Colombian government signed a contract with the newly incorporated Tropical Oil Company in 1916. In 1919 the Colombian government passed legislation declaring all subsoil resources the property of the Colombian state, but quickly reversed this decision upon receiving negative feedback from foreign investors. The Colombian government attempted to increase the percentage of royalties paid to the state in 1927 but were again rebuffed. See John D. Wirth, ed., *The Oil Business in Latin America: The Early Years* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 28.

⁶² Ibid.

suppressing strikes through armed force, as circumstances demanded, arresting strike organizers and breaking up protests.

Barrancabermeja stood out as one of the strangest contradictions on the Colombian landscape. The city was poor and isolated, yet modern in many ways. Barrancabermeja was the site of the main refinery. In its official newspaper, *The Lamp*, Standard Oil boasted to shareholders about the outstanding medical services provided to local workers and praised Colombia as “a progressive country” with a “stable and progressive government”.⁶³ But the company’s Colombian workers decried the poor quality of food, water, housing, and the generally difficult conditions they were exposed to, including disease, insects, stifling heat and isolation. As historian Jacques Aprile-Gnisset writes: “Since its beginnings, Barranca has been a city with no mules, but with trucks; with no blacksmiths or lawyers, but where soldiers and laundries proliferate; and thousands of peasants who would become the first proletariat in the country”.⁶⁴ The vast majority of the Colombian workers lived in Barranca’s port area. Most foreign managers lived in the Tropical Oil camp at El Centro, located approximately 30 kilometres inland, surrounded by fences and patrolled by a private security force. El Centro consisted of a large compound of ranch-style homes, as well as a medical clinic, a well-stocked commissary, meeting rooms, administrative offices, swimming pool and firing range. There was also housing for a small group of foreign personnel at Barranca, but this area was off limits to Colombian workers and other residents, except by special authorization.

Labour and living conditions were difficult. In 1910 there were 300 people living in Barranca. By 1919 Tropical Oil employed 1,000 people, the majority of whom were

⁶³ “The Reward of a Petroleum Adventure,” *The Lamp*, August 1926.

⁶⁴ Aprile-Gnisset, *Génesis de Barrancabermeja*, 257.

Colombian. Three years later, there were 4,000 people in the employ of Tropical Oil.⁶⁵ But the municipality registered only 226 houses.⁶⁶ By 1928 there were more than 8,000 people resident in the *municipio* of Barrancabermeja, including about 1,000 expatriate labourers from Jamaica. Most of the Colombians employed by Tropical Oil were classified as *peones*, or unskilled labourers. Some rustic accommodation was provided for the Colombian workers who arrived between 1916 and 1922 during the initial exploratory phase. But disease was rampant, and on some days as many as 50 per cent of the labour force would be stricken with malaria or hookworm.⁶⁷ The largest number of Colombian workers came from small towns and villages in the department of Santander, where Barranca is located. But poor conditions at Barranca, combined with the temporary nature of some of the early work in road-building, drilling and hauling equipment, contributed to a high desertion rate.⁶⁸ This forced Tropical Oil to continuously replenish their labour force through recruitment.⁶⁹ Labour recruiters, or *enganchadores*, were sent to the department of Antioquia and to the Caribbean coast to enlist workers on behalf of Tropical Oil.⁷⁰ Tropical Oil paid its Colombian workers on average 1 peso per day,

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁶ Guillermo Serrano Carranza, "Barrancabermeja; fragmentos y territorios. Procesos compositivos del área urbana" (master's thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2001), 70.

⁶⁷ Jairo Ernesto Luna García, "La salud de los trabajadores y el Tropical Oil Company," Conference paper delivered at XIII Congreso Colombiano de Historia (Bucaramanga, August 22-26, 2006), 6.

⁶⁸ Colombian workers migrated frequently and resisted being pinned-down. Maltreatment at the hands of Tropical Oil was a significant contributing factor to desertion, but not the only cause. Indeed, coastal workers in particular were accustomed to pursuing work on a seasonal basis.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁰ In exchange for a job and a place to live, young men from across Colombia agreed to indebt themselves to the Tropical Oil Company. Recruitment of workers through the *enganche* system sometimes coincided with labour unrest, as was the case in 1927 when

equivalent to about \$1 USD per day.⁷¹ While this wage was high by Colombian standards, it represented about one-fifth of what unskilled labourers in the oil industry were paid in the United States.⁷² And the money did not go far. Housing prices in Barranca were determined by investors in real estate who owned multiple buildings and rented beds out to single men. The many service workers and labourers working outside the purview of *la empresa* lived in self-built wooden shacks in and around the city's small but bustling port area.

Barrancabermeja was subject to extraordinary security measures that reflected its special status as a foreign enclave. In 1922 a National Police base was set up in Barranca, reinforcing the departmental, municipal and private police forces already present in the area.⁷³ Created in 1891, the National Police was originally intended to replace local police forces across the country. However, Colombia's strong regionalism prevented this national security policy from being implemented until the 1960s. In the meanwhile, the National Police remained a small force that was deployed very selectively. In the early twentieth century, the ruling Conservative Party established small National Police garrisons in traditional Liberal Party strongholds, such as the department of Santander.⁷⁴ Subsequent deployments were made to areas where export products and foreign interests were present, including the Santa Marta banana zone and

nearly 2,000 men were brought in following a labour stoppage that had resulted in the summary dismissal of half the labour force. See Serrano Carranza, "Barrancabermeja; fragmentos y territorios," 33.

⁷¹ Aprile-Gnisset, *Génesis de Barrancabermeja*, 193.

⁷² "Oil Workers Wages Cut," *New York Times*, July 31, 1921.

⁷³ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, ed., *Historia de la policía nacional de Colombia* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1993).

⁷⁴ Christopher Michael Cardona, "Politicians, Soldiers, and Cops: Colombia's La Violencia in Comparative Perspective" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008).

Barrancabermeja. The circumstances in Barranca were noteworthy because national and departmental police forces had to work alongside one another in spite of partisan differences between the national and departmental levels of government. The Colombian army also had a small base in Barranca, and navy ships regularly patrolled the Magdalena River around the city.⁷⁵

The next step in the development of Barrancabermeja was for Tropical Oil to secure its claim in political terms, and make certain that the company would never be subject to the interests and whims of local political authorities. In 1922 Barranca was named an independent *municipio*. This meant that Barranca would no longer fall within the jurisdiction of the agricultural centre of San Vicente de Chucurí. It was not clear whether Barrancabermeja fulfilled the legal requirements to be named a *municipio*. But Tropical Oil Company executives pressured the Colombian government in Bogotá to make the change. The decision to create the *municipio* of Barrancabermeja included an agreement that 5 per cent of the oil royalties earned by the Colombian state from the Tropical Oil Company's activities at Barranca would be used to provide services and infrastructure for local residents, as well as pay salaries of municipal functionaries.⁷⁶ All of the main formal utilities, services and businesses in the city were either owned by or under contract to Tropical Oil.

The earliest written account of life in Barranca from the perspective of Colombian workers was published in 1934.⁷⁷ Rafael Jaramillo Arango's *Barrancabermeja: A Novel*

⁷⁵ Aprile-Gnisset, *Genesis de Barrancabermeja*, 167.

⁷⁶ Serrano, "Barrancabermeja; fragmentos y territorios," 6.

⁷⁷ See Guansú Sohn, "La novela colombiana de protesta social: 1924-1948" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1976) and Luis Guillermo Romero García, *Sueños de río: inventario breve de la literatura en Barrancabermeja* (Bogotá: Fundación Somos, 2005).

of Pimps, Ruffians, Workers and Oilmen tells the story of a young man from Bogotá who comes to the oil centre to make his fortune.⁷⁸ He is overworked by his North American supervisor, falls in love with a prostitute, and is caught up in violent confrontations between workers and the Colombian army following a strike.⁷⁹ Jaramillo's *Barrancabermeja* was the first in a series of socially-engaged Colombian novels that denounced U.S. imperialism in Barranca. Between 1938 and 1978 Gonzalo Buenahora published 13 novels, collections of poetry and plays about life in Barranca. Born in nearby Piedecuesta, Santander, Buenahora was educated in Bogotá and worked as a physician amongst the oil workers of Barranca for four decades. Buenahora was deeply influenced by the Marxist worldview of friends and associates from the oil workers' union. In his most celebrated work, the social realist novel *Sangre y petróleo*, Buenahora tells the history of Barranca from the perspective of young men from the Colombian countryside who migrate to the enclave in search of work, come face-to face with the power of the foreign oil company, and participate in protests and strikes.⁸⁰

The culture of Barranca was rough and ready. The prevalence of single men in the city contributed to the development of a thriving sex trade. Prostitutes from Europe demanded a premium for their services, oftentimes equivalent to a day's wages of an oil worker. The memoir of Texas oilman W. O. Durham, who spent two stints in Barranca, in the 1920s and 1930s, provides a first-hand account of life in the early years of the Tropical Oil Company. Like dozens of other drillers from the United States and Canada, Durham went to Barranca to make money and find adventure. He travelled from Texas

⁷⁸ *Barrancabermeja (novela de proxenetas, rufianes, obreros y petroleros)*.

⁷⁹ Sohn, "La novela colombiana," 57.

⁸⁰ Gonzalo Buenahora, *Sangre y petróleo* 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Fotolito Inter 2000, 1982).

to New Orleans by train, and then by United Fruit Company steamer to Santa Marta, before making the long trek overland and up the Magdalena River to Barranca. Durham was an experienced wildcatter who set up small appraisal rigs in order to find the best sources of oil. For many of the first North American and Colombian workers, it was a hard-drinking and coarse lifestyle. The foremen wore sidearms and everyone spent their wages at the brothels in town. Many of the North Americans relished the hardships of life in the South American oilfields. There was a feeling of brotherhood amongst the foreign drillers who came to Barranca. The bond they shared was based on rugged individualism and adventure-seeking. And they knew that their time in the tropics was temporary.⁸¹

North American children who lived in El Centro and Barranca remember few hardships, other than the heat.⁸² That is because foreign managers and their families lived inside the gated enclave built by Tropical Oil to separate them from the mass of Colombian labourers and service workers, and never left. The daughter of David Appelbaum, Tropical Oil's chief purchasing agent, Pauline was born in Barranca. She remembers in great detail the arduous trip by paddle-wheeler up the Magdalena River between the Caribbean port of Barranquilla and Barranca. Visiting Barranca nearly forty years after she lived there, Pauline Appelbaum observed that while the city had grown and seemed more "Americanized" with paved roads, cinemas, sports facilities and shops, some things had remained the same: "We intuit a clue as to why Americans in foreign

⁸¹ W. O. Durham, *From Kittyhawk to the Moon: The Life, Times and Heritage of a Texas Oilman* (New York: Vantage Press, 2007).

⁸² P. Appelbaum and L. Appelbaum, "Barrancabermeja or Bust: Looking For Daddy's Oil Well," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1973.

lands cause resentment. Even in death we see here caste and race distinction, with foreigners buried on higher ground, separate from the natives”.⁸³

In 1928, there were 298 people employed by public institutions in Barrancabermeja, 65 per cent of whom worked for armed security forces charged with enforcing the division between Colombians and foreigners. As Aprile-Gnisset observes: “Barranca may be the first and only [Colombian] city to be born under a premature state of siege and periodically governed by a dual civil and military administration”.⁸⁴ When Felipe Simanca, one of the protagonists of Gonzalo Buenahora’s novel *Sangre y petróleo*, arrives in Barranca in the early 1920s in search of work, he immediately remarks on the way in which the town is divided: “It was a kind of border between Colombia and Gringolandia”.⁸⁵

The decoupling of industrial and local development is typical in oil enclaves the world over. Social and labour conflict is common because of the capital-intensive manner in which oil is exploited, and the manner in which revenues are dispersed, providing comparatively few benefits to local communities.⁸⁶ Oil enclaves tend to attract many more people to a region than the industry can employ, greatly exacerbating

⁸³ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁴ Aprile-Gnisset, *Génesis de Barrancabermeja*, 190.

⁸⁵ Buenahora, *Sangre y petróleo*, 29.

⁸⁶ In Latin America, oil and social conflicts have shaped the histories of Maracaibo (Venezuela), Tampico (Mexico), and Lago Agrio (Ecuador), among other places. Barranca, however, has played a role in the Colombian armed conflict that is more analogous to that of oil production centres in Lhokseumawe (Indonesia), Baku (Azerbaijan), and Cabinda (Angola). Like Barranca, these cities have been major theatres of both social conflict and civil war. There is important and growing body of academic literature on the connections between oil and armed conflict globally, particularly since the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. For work on oil, war and conflict see: Mary Kaldor, Terry Lynn Karl and Yahia Said, eds., *Oil Wars* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007); Philippe le Bion, ed., *The Geopolitics of Resource Wars: Resource Dependence, Governance and Violence* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005).

tensions. Local communities affected by oil operations frequently find themselves at odds with foreign companies, particularly over issues of local economic development. In the early phases of operations in particular, oil workers find themselves acting to improve basic working conditions and forestall layoffs, subcontracting, summary dismissals and other strategies utilized by the company to bring down the cost of labour. Moreover, because oil enclaves are poles of attraction for national and transnational workers, they are often structured along racial lines, whereby the most skilled and best paid positions are occupied by “white” North American or European personnel, and the least skilled and worst paid positions are occupied by local or imported “third world” workers.⁸⁷

Relations between the national workers and the more experienced, more highly-paid North American engineers and managers were fraught with resentment and misunderstanding. There was little social mixing between national and expatriate workers, as even the residences of higher-ranking Colombians were segregated from North American employees.⁸⁸ The company later acknowledged that the failure to provide adequate housing and opportunities for socializing amongst national and foreign workers contributed to labour unrest.⁸⁹ As remarked in the 1956 official history of Standard Oil of New Jersey: “Quite inadvertently, it seemed, the foreign companies in Colombia, as elsewhere in Latin America, were helping spark a revolution.”⁹⁰ In the 1930s Tropical Oil provided more and more services for workers and their families, including sports facilities, schools for workers’ children and housing. Colombian workers began to occupy higher paid positions, and the need for *peones* to carry out road-

⁸⁷ Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy*, 75.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁸⁹ Gibb and Knowlton, *The Resurgent Years*, 374.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 376.

building and other back-breaking tasks diminished. However, Colombian and North American employees continued to live separate lives.⁹¹

The Roots of Radical Political Culture

Radical political culture in Barrancabermeja has its roots in the structural, economic and social inequalities that prevailed in the city during the Tropical Oil era. The presence of a foreign corporation in the Magdalena Medio region created economic opportunity for thousands of Colombian men from Santander and the Atlantic coast, while maintaining a strict hierarchy that denied these workers the privileges reserved for foreign bosses. Radical culture was centred in the oil workers' union and left-wing political movements. In the 1920s strikes were organized by the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR), the forerunner of the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC).⁹² The nationalist stance of the PSR resonated with the anti-establishment tendencies of the Liberal fighters who had helped to settle the region in the first decade of the twentieth century. These forces combined in Barranca during strikes, many of which were carried out despite being declared illegal by the national government. As will be seen, leftist tendencies in the surrounding region contributed to the radicalization of workers in Barranca; including the PSR-led *bolcheviques* armed uprising that took place in timber and coffee export areas in the department of Santander in 1929.

There are a number of milestones in the history of Barrancabermeja that help to chart the city's development as a centre of anti-imperialist and radical politics. During

⁹¹ Luna García, "La salud de los trabajadores," 15.

⁹² Medófilo Medina, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Colombia*, vol. 1 (Bogotá: Editorial Colombia Nueva, 1980).

these events two dynamics emerge that would inform the development of a common culture of protest amongst Colombian workers in Barranca. First, the national government in Bogotá remained mainly concerned with political stability in Barranca. Throughout this period, successive Colombian governments interceded to suppress strike actions and protests. Second, the fact that the foreign-owned Tropical Oil Company treated workers and other residents with apparent disregard contributed to a sense of nationalism and imbued union organizing efforts with a sense of heroic, transcendent purpose. Major strikes by oil workers took place in 1924, 1927, 1935, 1938 and early 1948. Many of these were bitterly fought and ended in violence. The first two industrial actions, in 1924 and 1927, defied a national prohibition on union activity and had to be organized by workers' associations without the benefit of formal recognition and with no legal basis for negotiating collective agreements. The workers' demands resonated with leftist movements around the country and attracted well-known organizers such as María Cano and Raúl Mahecha.

The Colombian labour movement was very much in its infancy in 1922 when Barranca was established by the Tropical Oil Company. The 1920s was a period of rapid growth and radicalization amongst workers' organizations, extending from the Santa Marta banana export zone along the Magdalena River to Barranca. Prior to this, workers' associations in Colombia were mainly dedicated to mutual aid.⁹³ They provided services to members and their families, encouraged workers' self-improvement and advocated

⁹³ David Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement: Artisans and Politics in Bogotá, 1832-1919* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

strong religious values.⁹⁴ This was a direct legacy of the Catholic fraternities and voluntary associations formed by artisans in the nineteenth century in Bogotá. Amongst the first workers to organize strikes were the transportation workers of the Caribbean coast, including dockworkers based in the port city of Barranquilla and labourers who travelled on steamboats up and down the Magdalena River. In February 1910 Barranquilla-based dockworkers organized one of the first modern strikes in Colombian history.⁹⁵ These workers played a major role in the Colombian export economy, most significantly in ensuring the transport of tobacco and coffee. They also set an example for others to follow.

When grievances arose, Colombian workers came together to carry out strike actions and pressure employers for better wages, hours or other working conditions. But because the organizations that led these strikes were not legally recognized as unions by the 1887 Colombian civil code, they could not sign collective agreements on behalf of workers. Many of the early unions were therefore temporary.⁹⁶ The first major strikes against an international corporation in Colombia were organized by workers in the United Fruit Company banana zone in 1918 and 1919, which resulted in significant wage increases and other concessions.⁹⁷ In 1920 there were an unprecedented 32 labour strikes across Colombia, including several in the Magdalena Medio region.⁹⁸ The established

⁹⁴ Mauricio Archila Neira, “La clase obrera colombiana (1886-1930)” and “La clase obrera colombiana (1930-1945)” in *Nueva historia de Colombia* vol. III (Bogotá: Planeta, 1989), 219-270.

⁹⁵ Mauricio Archila Neira, “Barranquilla y el Río: una historia social de sus trabajadores” *Controversia* 142 (November 1987), 46.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁹⁷ Bucheli, *Bananas and Business*, 122.

⁹⁸ Archila “La clase obrera colombiana (1886-1930)”, 223.

river ports of Puerto Berrío and Puerto Wilches were becoming important areas of socialist-inspired labour organizing.⁹⁹

The 1920s also saw the emergence of new, independent, left-wing political movements. One of the most prominent leaders to inspire Barranca-based workers was pioneering union organizer Raúl Eduardo Mahecha, who arrived in Barranca in 1922 from Medellín. At 38 years of age, Mahecha's reputation was already established as a journalist and educator with strong anti-imperialist leanings. Mahecha helped found the *Unión Obrera* on February 12, 1923, the oil workers' organization which would become known as the *Unión Sindical Obrera*. Mahecha sought to link the struggles of Barranca's oil workers to other union and socialist movements across Colombia. In Barranca, he published an influential newspaper called *Vanguardia Obrera*, which reported on workers' rights and municipal politics.¹⁰⁰ The grievances highlighted by oil workers centred on living conditions and social rights rather than salaries. Access to housing, health care and quality food were at the top of the list. Other injustices were denounced, notably the fact that Colombian workers occupied the lowest positions in the company.¹⁰¹

In October 1924 oil workers led by Raúl Mahecha organized the first strike at Barrancabermeja. The workers' demands highlighted concerns about wages and benefits, as well as issues of regional development and economic nationalism, and the right of

⁹⁹ Leon Arredondo, "Liberalism, Working-Class Formation and Historical Memory: Dockworkers in a Colombian Frontier" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ Ignacio Torres Girado, *María Cano, mujer rebelde* (Bogotá: Publicaciones de la Rosca, 1972), 88. Publication of *Vanguardia Obrera* was suspended during Mahecha's imprisonment in 1924. It would be revived in 1926 and published for two more years. The *Vanguardia Obrera* in Barranca was revived during the 1930s by a group of left-wing intellectuals in Barranca known as Los Saturnales. Gonzalo Buenahora, *La comuna de Barranca: 9 de abril de 1948* (Bogotá: Gráfica Leipzig, 1971).

¹⁰¹ Renán Vega Cantor, *Gente muy rebelde: Enclaves, transportes y protestas obreras* vol. 1 (Bogotá: Ediciones pensamiento crítico, 2002), 270.

independent merchants in Barranca to sell food and other basic necessities inside the company enclave.¹⁰² Tropical Oil spokesperson Geo Shgweickert wrote to United States Ambassador to Colombia Samuel H. Piles to protest what the company saw as overly nationalist posturing on the part of the Colombian government. He complained that Tropical Oil had been embarrassed by the Minister of Industries, who publicly supported workers' claims to "score political points". Shgweickert also highlighted the presence of alleged outside agitators and Communists.¹⁰³ In the end, national authorities supported the oil company. After 10 days army troops and departmental police were sent from Bucaramanga to Barranca, where they carried out hundreds of arrests. Barranca was purged of known socialist elements, including Raúl Mahecha and several other organizers who were not employed by Tropical Oil. Mahecha was then taken to prison in Medellín, where he would end up serving 17 months. More than 1,200 workers were sacked and banned from returning to Barranca, and no significant concessions were earned.¹⁰⁴

The fate of the oil workers received national attention. In 1925, the Medellín-based Communist writer and campaigner María Cano, known as the revolutionary Flower of Labour, gave a now-legendary speech in Barranca to protest the transfer of imprisoned oil workers from Barranca to the city of Medellín following the 1924 strike.¹⁰⁵ During her address she spoke with personal aguish and quasi-religious fervor about the injustices

¹⁰² Serrano, "Barrancabermeja: ciudad región", 9.

¹⁰³ Geo C. Shgweickert, "Informe de un funcionario norteamericano sobre la huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924," *Anuario colombiano de historia social y de la cultura* 13-14 (1985-1986), 319-333.

¹⁰⁴ Vega Cantor, *Gente muy rebelde* vol. 1, 234.

¹⁰⁵ The term Flower of Labour is derived from the title bestowed on women workers who won factory beauty pageants or *reinados*. For more on women's labour in Colombia and the special significance of María Cano, see Anne Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905-1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 173.

done to Barranca's workers: "This small group of brave souls, who yesterday cried out in rebellion in order to stop the terrible avalanche of foreign oppression, have received cruel imprisonment, humiliation and, worse still, indolence. Their cause is hidden in a shroud of ice".¹⁰⁶ María Cano would return to Barranca in 1926 as part of an organizing drive for the PSR during which she visited the principal port towns of the Magdalena River, from Honda to Giradot, ending in Barranca. On her second visit, Cano was accompanied by Ignacio Torres Giraldo, the co-founder and secretary general of the socialist trade union federation, the *Confederación Obrera Nacional*. Their 1926 visit to Barranca was organized by Raúl Mahecha as an attempt to generate popular support for a planned oil workers strike. Cano and Torres left Barranca on January 1, 1927, and the strike was declared one week later.¹⁰⁷

The 1927 strike was a replay of that of 1924. Raúl Mahecha and other organizers returned to Barranca. None of the main issues raised during the 1924 strike around housing, health services, food, and the institution of the 8-hour work day had been resolved. The *Unión Obrera* also demanded that the organizers of the 1924 strike be exonerated. This time striking oil workers were joined by dockworkers employed in the shipment of oil, and employees of the Andian National Corporation, the Standard Oil subsidiary that owned the recently inaugurated pipeline to Cartagena. The national government declared emergency "state of siege" measures in all of the towns along the Magdalena River, imposing curfews and setting up checkpoints, and once again security

¹⁰⁶ María Cano Márquez, *Escritos* compiled by Miguel Escobar Calle (Medellín: Extensión cultural Departamental, 1985), 109.

¹⁰⁷ Torres Giraldo, *María Cano, mujer rebelde*, 88.

forces were deployed to Barranca.¹⁰⁸ Several Tropical Oil workers were killed when police opened fire on a demonstration. Raúl Mahecha and other strike organizers were arrested, and displayed in public stocks in small towns as they were transported to prison in the highlands in Tunja, in the department of Boyacá.

The repression of oil strikes garnered national attention and Barranca continued to be a major centre of left-wing organizing. At the national level, the most prominent of the new progressive political leaders in the late 1920s and early 1930s was Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, an independent-minded, young and charismatic lawyer from the Liberal Party, who made a reputation for himself as a defender of workers' rights and came to national prominence when he denounced the 1928 massacre of banana workers in Santa Marta.¹⁰⁹ Outside of Gaitán's base in Bogotá, the cities of Barranquilla and Barranca were the two major centres of support for the young leader.¹¹⁰ Throughout the 1920s the Liberal Party had increased its reach and influence by supporting labour organizations, including the *Unión Sindical Obrera* oil workers union in Barranca. Many artisans, peasants and labourers who had fought for the Liberal Party in the Thousand Days' War identified with emerging left-wing movements, such as the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's only visit to Barranca took place in July of 1929 as part of a speaking tour he conducted en route back to Bogotá from Ciénaga, the site of the massacre of

¹⁰⁸ The term *estado de sitio*, or state of siege, used in Colombia and throughout Latin America, is derived from French revolutionary law. The term was first used in a decree of the French Constituent Assembly in 1791 granting civilian political authority to the military. In Anglo-Saxon law the preferred terms are state of emergency or martial law. I use the Colombian term *estado de sitio* throughout this dissertation. Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4-5.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978).

¹¹⁰ John W. Green, *Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism and Popular Mobilization in Colombia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 330.

banana workers in December of the previous year.¹¹¹ He stopped in Barranca for a just a few hours and addressed an assembly of workers in the city's port while standing on the deck of a boat.

On July 27, 1929 armed rebellions were launched simultaneously in the departments of Tolima and Santander under the direction of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR). The *bolcheviques* of El Líbano (Tolima), San Vicente de Chucurí and Puerto Wilches (Santander) constituted the first attempt at armed Communist insurrection in Latin American history.¹¹² In Santander, the movement centred around a workers' camp at La Gómez, a train station that serviced the lumber town of Puerto Wilches on the Magdalena River, 20 kilometres north of Barranca.¹¹³ By the mid 1920s the national government had begun to invest in the expansion of railways in the Magdalena Medio, the most significant of which was a project to link the lumber town of Puerto Wilches to Bucaramanga, using the proceeds of the financial settlement that Colombia had reached with the United States over the loss of Panama.¹¹⁴ Thousands of young men were drawn to the Magdalena Medio region from different parts of the department of Santander to clear land and lay tracks. Many of the *bolcheviques'* leaders in Puerto Wilches and San Vicente de Chucurí were descended from veterans of the Thousand Days' War.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Ibid., 61.

¹¹² Gonzalo Sánchez, *1929 Los bolcheviques del Líbano* (Bogotá: El Mohan Editores, 1976).

¹¹³ Alejo Vargas Velásquez, "Tres momentos de la violencia política en San Vicente Chucurí (de los bolcheviques del año 29 a la fundación del ELN)," *Análisis Político* 8 (September-December 1988), 33-47.

¹¹⁴ Augusto Olarte Carreño, *La construcción del ferrocarril de Puerto Wilches a Bucaramanga 1870 a 1941: síntesis de una obra discontinua y costosa* (Bucaramanga: Sic Editorial, 2006).

¹¹⁵ Renán Vega Cantor, *Gente muy rebelde: socialismo, cultura y protesta popular* vol. 4. (Bogotá: Ediciones Pensamiento Crítico, 2002), 270.

The 1929 insurrection was conceived as a national movement, but never came close to meeting its objectives. The rebels numbered about 450 in Santander and 3,000 in Tolima. A small and quixotic movement, it was swiftly crushed by Colombian state security forces. In the Magdalena Medio the *bolcheviques*' actions were perceived as a threat to national and foreign interests.¹¹⁶ An estimated 200 army troops were sent from Bucaramanga to Barranca to ensure the protection of Tropical Oil property. In nearby Puerto Berrío, suspected rebels and rebel-sympathizers were detained and locked up aboard a navy gunboat as a precautionary measure. In Bucaramanga, the highland capital of Santander, another 100 suspected rebels were jailed, and a "civil guard" of 400 armed civilians organized by the national government to patrol the streets.¹¹⁷ Neither the oil workers at Barranca nor the dockworkers in Puerto Berrío joined the cause.¹¹⁸ The show of military force in Barranca demonstrated that the Colombian government was prepared to take the necessary measures to guarantee the flow of oil.¹¹⁹

Barrancabermeja's oil workers embraced a heterodox form of popular radicalism that incorporated aspects of Socialism and Colombian Liberalism. These "Liberal leftists, anarchists, independent radicals and Communists" were inspired by the triumphs

¹¹⁶ In his study of the 1929 Bolshevik uprising in Tolima, Santander and Valle, historian Gonzalo Sánchez notes that the Colombian government was under considerable pressure not to allow another bloodbath, after the banana massacre of 1928. In response to the 1929 insurrection, the Colombian government undertook mass detentions and militarized the regions in question, but there was no massacre. Sánchez, *Los bolcheviques*, 97.

¹¹⁷ "Red Risings Alarm Colombia, With 10 Dead; Cavalry Involved, Reserves May be Called, *The New York Times*, August 6, 1929.

¹¹⁸ The only documented killing of a foreign national working for Tropical Oil was the robbery and shooting death of paymaster Paul Leroy Keating on May 9, 1930. At the time he was carrying the equivalent of more than \$30,000 U.S. in Colombian pesos. United States Department of State, "Colombia: Murder of American Citizen" *Press Releases* 32 (May 10, 1930), 245.

¹¹⁹ Alejo Vargas Velásquez, "Tres momentos de la violencia," 35.

of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.¹²⁰ In an attempt to resolve tensions between Liberal and Marxist adherents within its ranks, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) dissolved in July of 1930 and transformed itself into the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC).¹²¹ At the local level, however, Communists and Liberals continued to work together. For instance, the *Sindicato de Braceros Portuarios* dockworkers' union in Puerto Berrío was established in 1934 by an alliance that included both Communists and Liberal supporters of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.¹²² Radical Liberal and Communist tendencies amongst workers in Barrancabermeja continued to gain strength until 1948 when *La Violencia* erupted, dividing the country along Liberal versus Conservative lines and restricting the political space available to independent movements.¹²³ Violence between Liberals and Conservatives had erupted sporadically through the mid 1940s in other regions of Colombia. But following the murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948, the violence spread and intensified precipitously.

The poor migrants who came to Barranca in search of work were united by the harshness of their material circumstances. They participated in ground-breaking forms of

¹²⁰ For a detailed discussion of radical Liberalism and its outcomes in a Colombian coffee growing region, see Michael F. Jiménez, "The Limits of Export Capitalism: Economic Structure, Class and Politics in a Colombian Coffee Municipality, 1900-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1985).

¹²¹ Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Colombia, *Treinta años de lucha del Partido Comunista de Colombia* (Bogotá: Ediciones los Comuneros, 1960).

¹²² Arredondo, "Liberalism, Working-Class Formation and Historical Memory," 134.

¹²³ Michael F. Jiménez writes that by the end of the 1930s most peasant organizations in the coffee-producing region of the department of Cundinamarca had been "disbanded or brought under Liberal control". However, Communist-led peasant leagues in Viotá and other *municipios* survived. These movements, like the movement in Barranca, constituted links between popular organizations that flourished prior to the outbreak of *La Violencia* in 1948 and the resurgence of left-wing organization following the end of *La Violencia* in 1958. Jiménez, "The Limits of Export Capitalism," 12.

trade union and social movement organization. The roughness of life and labour in a foreign-run oil enclave were given voice through workers' organizations, and meaning through rituals of public protest. Barranca became a city of counter-hegemonic invented traditions, an important centre of left-wing organizing and a symbol of resistance for Colombian working peoples.¹²⁴ Uninhibited by traditional social and economic structures, popular expressions of anti-authoritarianism mingled with radical Liberalism, socialism and economic nationalism. Workers' organizations led strikes against Tropical Oil, challenged the Conservative Party government in Bogotá, rattled the leadership of the Liberal Party, and gave impetus to reformers and rebels.

The 1948 Barrancabermeja Commune Uprising

During the foreign enclave period, Barranca's radical political culture was concentrated in the oil workers and their union. Though connected to national political movements and a national labour federation, the union was quite unique, both in terms of its history of combativeness and the political clout it carried into each strike. In Barranca there was also a high level of sympathy for left-wing political movements. These included the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) and the popular wing of the Liberal Party, personified by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Towards the end of the 1940s, there occurred a major uprising in the city that gives a sense of the wider community's political

¹²⁴ As historian Eric Hobsbawm writes, "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past." Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

engagement, and identification with the culture of defiance. The *Comuna de Barrancabermeja* showed that Barranca was much more than the refinery and oil fields. Across Colombia, similar popular uprisings took place in the aftermath of the murder of Gaitán on April 9, 1948. The uprising was ultimately put down by the Colombian army, and thus led to the containment of popular movement organizing in Barranca for the duration of *La Violencia*. As a result, Barranca's radical culture waned during this period. Resistance to the national government in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the region is associated more with rural guerrillas, under the command of *Comuna de Barrancabermeja* leader Rafael Rangel.

By the late 1940s the politics of *convivencia*, or mutual tolerance between Liberals and Conservatives, was over. Liberal populist figure Jorge Eliécer Gaitán had emerged as the leading candidate for national leadership of the party and the most popular politician in the country. Gaitán himself distinguished between what he called the *país político* and the *país nacional* to emphasize the breach between the world of politics (*la clase política*) and daily life (*el pueblo*).¹²⁵ The exclusion of *el pueblo* from meaningful participation in politics – in spite of broad clientelist networks developed by the two parties – has been a significant generator of conflict in Colombian history. Gaitán's murder on April 9, 1948 led what historians have dubbed the *Bogotazo*, the largest riot in Latin American history, which left hundreds dead. Elsewhere in Colombia, small uprisings and disturbances had broken out as well.¹²⁶ The death of Gaitán unleashed a flood of spontaneous anger in Barranca, resulting in the seizing of the city by

¹²⁵ Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹²⁶ Gonzalo Sánchez, *Los días de la revolución: gaitanismo y 9 de abril en provincia* (Bogotá : Centro Cultural Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, 1983).

gaitanista forces, led by Rafael Rangel Gómez.¹²⁷ Rafael Rangel was a police officer, and like many other officials in Liberal-controlled areas, he responded to Gaitán's death by rebelling against the national government, led at the time by Conservative President Mariano Ospina Pérez.¹²⁸

The rebellion set off by the murder of Gaitán, called the *Comuna de Barranca*, involved the entire community more completely than any of the previous union-led strikes.¹²⁹ It was the clearest early instance in which a broad-based local movement comprised of oil workers and other residents came together to challenge the authority of the Tropical Oil Company and the Colombian government, controlled by the Conservative Party at the time. During ten days, *gaitanistas* in Barranca formed what they dubbed a "revolutionary junta". They employed weapons seized from police to guard against incursions from national security forces. They even built a canon to defend themselves. Committees were organized to ensure the distribution of food and water, since the city was largely cut off from the outside world. The uprising in Barranca was far more focused and politically coherent than the riots in the capital. It was, nevertheless, isolated and unsustainable. By April 19, 1948 an agreement between the leaders of the junta and the national government was signed. Under tremendous duress and exhausted, the leadership of the *Comuna de Barranca* negotiated an amnesty for themselves and put down their arms. The amnesty was violated the following day, as the

¹²⁷ Apolinar Díaz Callejas, *Diez días de poder popular: el 9 de abril en Barrancabermeja* (Bogotá: Editorial el Labrador, 1988), 101.

¹²⁸ Guzmán, Fals and Umaña, *La Violencia en Colombia*, 213.

¹²⁹ Buenahora, *La Comuna de Barranca*.

army occupied the city and junta organizers were arrested, leading to their prosecution before a special military tribunal, or *concejo verbal de guerra*.¹³⁰

Gaitán's murder ignited a period of civil conflict in Colombia known as *La Violencia* that would claim 200,000 lives between 1948 and 1958.¹³¹ A national state of siege was declared by Colombia's Conservative President Mariano Ospina Pérez on May 31, 1948 that lasted for 10 years. Constitutional order was only restored in 1958 with the creation of the National Front power-sharing arrangement between warring Liberals and Conservatives.¹³² Early in *La Violencia*, the former leader of the *Comuna de Barrancabermeja*, Rafael Rangel, took up arms in the countryside; on the day of general elections held November 27, 1949 Rangel led an assault on the nearby town of San Vicente de Chucurí. Rangel and his supporters, most of whom were *gaitanistas* and Liberals, waged a guerrilla campaign against Conservative-led national police across the department of Santander, ambushing roadblocks and occasionally temporarily taking control of entire villages. For several years, Rangel's forces grew in direct proportion to Conservative repression in rural Santander, but eventually succumbed to their enemy.¹³³

¹³⁰ Díaz Callejas, *Diez días de poder popular*, 144.

¹³¹ For further reading on *La Violencia*, see Paul Oquist, *Violence, Conflict, and Politics in Colombia* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, 1946-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants and Politics: the Case of La Violencia in Colombia* Trans. Alan Hynds, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) ; Daniel Pécaut, *L'ordre et la violence: évolution socio-politique de la Colombie entre 1930 et 1953* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1987).

¹³² Gabriel Ricardo Nemogá, "Contexto social y político de las transformaciones institucionales de la administración de justicia en Colombia," in *El caleidoscopio de las justicias en Colombia*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Mauricio García Villegas, vol.1 (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2001), 215-260.

¹³³ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 214.

On August 3, 1953, Rangel's forces demobilised in the *municipio* of Santa Helena del Opón, located to the south of Barranca. After giving up their arms they proceeded into the city where they met with supporters in the working-class Barrio Palmira. This would mark the end of the worst of *La Violencia* in the Magdalena Medio region. Rangel's transition to civilian life was part of a broader truce signed between Liberal guerrillas and President General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Just two months prior to the demobilisation of the *rangelistas*, General Rojas had led a military coup d'état supported by leaders of both the Liberals and Conservatives. As Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens write: "Rojas Pinilla had practically been forced to take power by the political bosses, who, except for those in the defeated faction, were unwilling to run any more risks regarding the potential for revolution or uncontrolled anarchy that was festering behind *La Violencia*".¹³⁴

In practice, demobilisation of the main Liberal guerrilla forces in Santander, Tolima and the Eastern Plains (the Llanos Orientales) in the early 1950s was only partial. At the grassroots level, rural guerrilla fighters were reluctant to lay down their arms. Unresolved hostility towards the Conservatives and mistrust of Liberal political leaders were significant factors in the continuation of violence. Many of Rafael Rangel's men chose to remain at arms, and they continued to carry out military actions. Notably, former *rangelistas* continued to harass and intercept trade along the Magdalena River in order to maintain themselves.¹³⁵ In 1960, after a peace accord had been signed by the Liberal and Conservative parties, Rangel would establish a political movement called the *Movimiento Rangelista Liberal*, under the auspices of the national Liberal Party. Rangel

¹³⁴ Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants and Politics*, 19.

¹³⁵ Guzmán, Fals and Umaña, *La Violencia en Colombia*, 215.

was elected to the Colombian House of Representatives in 1964, but fell ill and died suddenly before beginning his term in office.¹³⁶

Despite the violence in the countryside, the period 1948-1960 were years of corporate hegemony and calm in Barranca, due to the successful containment of local labour and social movements by the state. Closely monitored by national authorities, Barranca remained virtually untouched by violence. Many people displaced by *La Violencia* migrated to Barranca in search of work, and a small group of investors began to develop commercial agriculture and cattle ranching in nearby rural areas that were within the sphere of influence of Tropical Oil.¹³⁷ The calm in Barranca following the handover of the De Mares Concession to the Colombian state in 1951 hinged both on the capacity of the Tropical Oil Company to discipline its workforce, and of the national government to ensure that workers and organizers were kept quiet. The *Unión Sindical Obrera* lost its legal status in 1950 as part of national anti-union legislation, restored only in 1961 when the Tropical Oil Company refinery and production facilities reverted to state control. In the interim, the city of Barranca and the department of Santander were governed by military officers.¹³⁸

The Nationalization of the Barranca Oil Industry

As the return of the De Mares concession to national control approached, controversy erupted. The Tropical Oil Company and the Colombian government

¹³⁶ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 134, 159.

¹³⁷ Archila, *Aquí nadie es forastero*, 196.

¹³⁸ Luisa Serrano, “Barrancabermeja Ciudad-Región” (paper presented at the III Congreso de la Asociación de Historiadores Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, Pontevedra, Spain, October 2001), 10.

disagreed as to the exact date that the return should take place. The government argued that the concession expired in 1949. Standard Oil maintained that the date should be 1951. The fundamental issue was whether the concession expired 30 years from the commencement of drilling in 1919, or 30 years from the purchase of Tropical Oil by Standard Oil in 1921. Standard Oil's claim was eventually vindicated by the Colombian Supreme Court in 1944.¹³⁹ The stakes were high, as in 1945 the Tropical Oil Company still accounted for more than 50 per cent of Colombia's total oil production.¹⁴⁰

The last major oil workers' strike in this period was organized by the *Unión Sindical Obrera* in March 1948. At the time, Tropical Oil was lobbying for another extension of its control over the De Mares Concession. The nationalist-oriented union strongly opposed this proposal.¹⁴¹ A few months prior, Tropical Oil had dismissed 107 workers, according to the workers, without apparent cause, and union members demanded the company to give them their jobs back. The Colombian government appointed a special tribunal charged with arbitrating a solution to the strike, and ordered the 107 workers dismissed by Tropical Oil to be reinstated.¹⁴² Tropical Oil officials were irritated by the intervention of the government, and warned that Colombia would have to

¹³⁹ Murray, "Know-How and Nationalism," 216.

¹⁴⁰ In 1945 taxes and royalties earned from oil production represented 7.3 per cent of state revenues. Nearly 15,000 Colombians were directly employed by the oil industry. The coffee industry's total economic output was double that of oil, but coffee production was very labour intensive, and coffee employed hundreds of thousands of Colombians. By 1955 there were 212,970 coffee farms in Colombia, most of which were small owner-administered businesses. Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 302.

¹⁴¹ Jorge Villegas, *Petróleo colombiano, ganancia gringa* 2nd Printing. (Bogotá: El Áncora Editores, 1998).

¹⁴² "Oil Verdict in Colombia: Tribunal Orders Company to Reinstatement 107 Workers," *New York Times*, March 17, 1948.

increase gasoline imports if nationalization went ahead as planned and the company was obliged to leave prematurely. Tropical Oil reduced production, and equipment that should have passed into the hands of the government was surreptitiously removed or left in disrepair.¹⁴³ Output at Barranca had gradually decreased from 20.5 million barrels in 1941 to 12.3 million barrels in 1947.¹⁴⁴ The strike itself lasted 49 days. During the course of the strike, oil workers union leaders were arrested. Conservative President Luis Mariano Ospina Pérez eventually pressured Tropical Oil to sign a new collective agreement. President Ospina was lauded by some of the strikers for his role in mediating an end to the strike and securing concessions from Tropical Oil.¹⁴⁵

At a ceremony on August 26, 1951 attended by thousands of *barranqueños* and dignitaries from Bogotá, as well as Standard Oil and International Petroleum officials, the De Mares concession was handed over to the state. It was the first step in a two-phase process of nationalization of all of the Tropical Oil holdings in the Magdalena Medio. Tropical Oil retained a 10-year lease on the refinery at Barranca, which was nationalized in 1961. Tropical Oil also retained a sizeable interest in the new state entity by means of its \$10 million U.S. loan to Ecopetrol towards the purchase of a high octane cracking plant, necessary for the production of jet fuel.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Tropical Oil granted the right to sell refined products to Colombia at market prices.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Archila, *Aquí, nadie es forestero*, 143.

¹⁴⁴ “In 1951 Tropical Oil Company Concession of 30 Years Comes to End: Present Government Seeks Expert Aid From U.S. to Guide Later Acts,” *Globe and Mail*, August 6, 1948.

¹⁴⁵ Archila, *Aquí, nadie es forestero*, 144.

¹⁴⁶ “Tropical Oil Co. After 30 Years Turns Back 1,000,000-Acre De Mares Field to Colombia,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1951.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Barrancabermeja was the first major oil venture in Latin America ever to be handed over to state control without recourse to expropriation. The nationalization of the De Mares concession in 1951, at the height of *La Violencia*, initiated a process of reconfiguration of labour relations in Barranca and the pacification of the union movement. The *Empresa Colombiana de Petróleos* (Ecopetrol) was created in 1951. The creation of Ecopetrol marked a major shift in the dynamic between citizens, organized labour, local government and the national state. Of the more than 4,000 workers in Barranca, 1,500 of them now worked for Ecopetrol, while 2,500 remained with Tropical Oil in the refinery.¹⁴⁸ Fireworks and cheers greeted the official announcement made at midnight, followed by music and dancing until dawn. Ecopetrol was more than just a state-run oil company. It was a symbol of national pride, especially for the people of Barranca.

In his influential study of *La Violencia* of the 1950s historian Paul Oquist describes how areas of “state coherence” or special political stability were impervious to partisan fighting.¹⁴⁹ He cites, for instance, an area in the department of Caldas where there existed a strong tradition of collaboration between the majority Liberals and the minority Conservatives.¹⁵⁰ The *municipio* of Aguadas was a veritable island of calm in a sea of violence, as Caldas was by far the most violent area in all of Colombia.¹⁵¹ This

¹⁴⁸ “De Mares Concession Reverts to Colombia,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 27, 1951.

¹⁴⁹ Oquist, *Violence, Conflict, and Politics*, 235.

¹⁵⁰ A very similar phenomenon was studied by historian Alberto Flórez-Malagón in an area of the department of Boyacá: “...what differentiates Ubaté and neighbouring regions (and what could have operated to suppress open violent conflict in other parts of the country) was the strength and the clarity of the system of power that existed there”.

Alberto Flórez-Malagón, *Una isla en un mar de sangre: el Valle de Ubaté durante La Violencia, 1946-1958* (Bogotá: Centro Editorial Javeriano, La Carreta Ediciones, 2005).

¹⁵¹ Oquist, *Violence, Conflict, and Politics*, 6.

explanation can be applied to Barranca, because the city of Barrancabermeja was an area of nearly hegemonic Liberal Party influence. It was, moreover, an area of relative prosperity, and neither Liberals nor Conservatives had an interest in upsetting the balance. The presence of a large transnational corporation in Barranca also encouraged stability, although, as historian Mary Roldán has shown, political violence was carried out by rival Liberals and Conservatives across the river from Barranca in the Shell-owned oil camp in Casabe, Antioquia.¹⁵² In general, the impact of *La Violencia* was harsher in areas of the country where Liberal and Conservative clientelist networks competed for control over land and resources.¹⁵³ For instance, campaigns of extermination were carried out against Liberal Party members in Puerto Berrío, in spite of the fact that Puerto Berrío was an area of foreign direct investment.¹⁵⁴ Barranca was a far more important economic centre than either Puerto Berrío or Casabe. It was, moreover, a city, whereas Puerto Berrío and Casabe were small towns on the edge of vast disputed rural areas.

Some scholars see *La Violencia* as a period of breakdown of the Colombian state. The conflict between the Liberal and Conservative parties in Colombia, which had framed civil wars during the nineteenth century, was exacerbated again during *La Violencia*. Yet the state did continue to function in key ways. The history of Barrancabermeja during this period puts into evidence what Mary Roldán has described as the emergence in the middle of the twentieth century of an increasingly interventionist, if diffuse and “morally weak”, Colombian state.¹⁵⁵ In short, the national state continued to intervene in issues of security at the local level, sometimes in concert with regional

¹⁵² Roldán, *La Violencia in Antioquia*, 145.

¹⁵³ Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 268.

¹⁵⁴ Oquist, *Violence, Conflict and Politics*, 232.

¹⁵⁵ Roldán, *Blood and Fire*, 106.

authorities, sometimes in opposition to them. In Barranca, the years of *La Violencia* were also the period of transition from foreign enclave to Colombian state-run company town.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the relationship between region and class in the development of social and political identity in Colombia's oil enclave.¹⁵⁶ Between 1919 and 1961, Barrancabermeja was transformed from a small village, into a state-of-the-art industrial enclave and the most important centre of progressive union and social movement organizing in Colombia. Nowhere else in Colombia have there existed social movements so densely knitted together and so durable. Barranca is home to the oldest and most powerful industrial trade union in Colombia, the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO). This is an extraordinary legacy by any standard, and utterly unique in Colombia, where labour and social movements have remained modest in size when compared with other Latin American countries.¹⁵⁷ Barrancabermeja was a symbol of modern capitalist industrialization in a country that relied on agricultural exports and underdeveloped systems of transportation. The presence of a powerful multinational corporation in Barranca drew the national state into a dynamic of increasing involvement. The uprising that took place on April 9, 1948 was the apogee of Barranca's radical popular movement.¹⁵⁸ Barranca allows us to view the national state as a constant presence in an area of special strategic and economic importance, over a prolonged period of time.

¹⁵⁶ Catherine C. LeGrand, "Historias transnacionales: nuevas interpretaciones de los enclaves en América Latina", *Nómadas* 25 (October 2006), 144-154.

¹⁵⁷ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 20.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

To understand the special role of the national state in the history of Barrancabermeja is to understand why the city's labour and social movements remained the most militant and energetic in all of Colombia in the twentieth century. While the humid lowlands around present-day Barranca were sparsely settled, they were nonetheless fiercely contested by *colonos* and capitalists, including foreign investors. The arrival of Tropical Oil created new sources of tension, as thousands of people came to Barranca in search of work. The Colombian state defended Tropical Oil and subdued oil workers' strikes through often through military force and sometimes through legislation banning the union. Occasionally, the central government mediated solutions to labour crises and acted to support the claims made by the *Unión Sindical Obrera*. But by and large, union organizers viewed the state as antagonistic to workers' interests. This dynamic of conflict between the state and oil workers was particularly acute during the period leading up to the reversion of the De Mares Concession to state control. Competing claims made on Colombia's national oil industry by workers, Tropical Oil and the state came to a violent climax in 1948. Perhaps more importantly, the departure of the Tropical Oil Company in 1961 would sharpen the conflict between *barranqueños* and Bogotá. This chapter explores the relationship between region and class in the development of social and political identity in this industrial enclave.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Catherine C. LeGrand, "Historias transnacionales: nuevas interpretaciones de los enclaves en América Latina", *Nómadas* 25 (October 2006): 144-154.

PART II: City and Region (1961-1980)

Chapter 2

Oil Nationalization, Local Development and the Cold War

The ‘cosmopolitanism’ of Barranca, along with the ‘weakness’ of traditional forms of domination, has made *barranqueños* open to new things, in particular to all forms of discourse that are alternative to the dominant discourse... the ties of solidarity are a product of the uprooting that immigrants to Barranca experienced... and especially the solidarity of labour.²³¹

Mauricio Archila, historian.

Introduction: New Forms of Protest

The departure of the Tropical Oil Company in 1961 renewed, rather than laid to rest, social and political conflict in Barranca. In the 1960s new modalities of public protest emerged that reflected the transformation of Barrancabermeja from oil enclave to cosmopolitan urban centre. The shift to national control over the oil industry in Barranca in 1961, coupled with rapid population growth, fundamentally changed the way in which local residents viewed their relationship with the central government and with one another. This was a time of significant political change across Colombia. The nationalization of Tropical Oil property in Barranca was carried out by the National Front government, which had been formed in 1958 as the result of a peace agreement between the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties. Unionized oil workers, who had been maligned during the era of Tropical Oil and silenced during *La Violencia*, supported both the nationalization and the peace accord. But the relationship between residents of Barranca and the National Front government was marred by conflict around issues of local development. Residents of the city and oil workers soon recognized that they were

²³¹ Archila, *Aquí nadie es forastero*, 50.

no better off under the publicly run company and that they had little recourse to bring about improvements through conventional political means.

Historian Mauricio Archila writes that regional identity, rather than class or ethnic origin, has been the most important basis of popular movement organizing in Colombia.²³² One of the outcomes of social upheaval in 1960s Barranca was the consolidation of a new civic identity, beyond the nexus of labour and capital. Developments in Barranca reflected the tension between popular aspirations and the exclusionary politics espoused by the National Front government, against the backdrop of the Cold War.²³³ Open conflict with the national government had the impact of uniting *barranqueños*. Historian Alejo Vargas writes, "...there seemed to be a process of coming together amongst the actors confronting the state and this allowed for the creation of bonds of solidarity and mutual legitimization among them".²³⁴

The most important event of this era in terms of popular protest was the staging of a *paro cívico*, or civil strike, in 1963 that shut down the city for three days. It was the largest act of non-violent civil disobedience that had ever been organized in the history of the city, and a precedent-setting model of collaboration between labour, civic and peasant groups. In a city as tightly controlled and as undemocratically governed as Barranca, the *paro cívico* became a powerful symbol of resistance. It represented an interruption of the established order through non-violent means. To borrow a notion from Walter Benjamin, the *paro cívico* is a popular "state of emergency", that lays bare contradictions, and expresses frustration with traditional political and economic structures. In his *Theses on*

²³² Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 67

²³³ Robert Alexander Karl, "State Formation, Violence, and Cold War in Colombia, 1957-1966" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009), 365.

²³⁴ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 151.

the Philosophy of History, Benjamin wrote: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency”.²³⁵ Benjamin’s much-cited axiom reminds us of the precarious conditions under which most people have lived throughout human history. Benjamin contended that ordinary people could provoke crises on their own terms and thus generate historical change. In the case of Barranca, the *paro cívico* was a means of mass socialization, as well as a form of “collective bargaining by disruption”.²³⁶ As Mauricio Archila writes: “Civic movements in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated the radical implications of people taking an interest in their own municipality, which one way or another is their destiny.”²³⁷

This chapter examines the correlation between popular protest and its suppression, the escalation of political violence, and the emergence of new social actors in Barrancabermeja during the 1960s. Landless squatters carried out the first major urban land occupations in Barranca in 1959, 1961 and 1963.²³⁸ While urban squatters do not play a central role in the urban popular movement until the following decade, the growth of the city through informal means is a major shift that increases pressure on Barranca’s already stretched infrastructure. As already mentioned, the first *paro cívico* for

²³⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 392.

²³⁶ León Zamosc, “The Political Crisis and the Prospects for Rural Democracy in Colombia” *Journal of Development Studies* 25:4 (1990), 48.

²³⁷ Archila, *Aquí nadie es forastero*, 199.

²³⁸ Equipo de Trabajo Popular, “El Movimiento Popular en Barrancabermeja”, in Álvaro Cabrera, et al, eds., *Los movimientos cívicos* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP, 1986), 76.

improvements in public services and infrastructure was convened in 1963. The first major oil strike in Barranca since 1948 was organized by the *Unión Sindical Obrera* in 1963. By 1965 there were two Marxist insurgencies active in the Magdalena Medio, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Each of these social developments is discussed within the context of a narrowing of the space for political action and the deepening of the Cold War.

Contesting Local Development

In the 1960s, local development issues were the subject of tremendous political debate in Barranca in large part because of the strain of urbanization. The population of Barrancabermeja almost doubled during the decade from 48,985 to 88,500.²³⁹ The city administration was totally unprepared to respond to this major demographic change. Ordinary citizens in Barranca did not have access to the modern medical clinics, social clubs and well-stocked commissaries run by Ecopetrol. Colombian Ecopetrol managers occupied the same comfortable homes that their predecessors had, isolated from the general population. Nationalization, it seemed, was not going to readily produce direct benefits for the local population.

Apart from oil, Barranca remained chronically underdeveloped and poor.²⁴⁰ The second largest industry in Barranca was the state-owned fertilizer factory located in the northeast of the city. *Fertilizantes Colombianos* (Ferticol), established in 1960, employed 350 people in the production of natural gas-derived nitrogen fertilizers for the

²³⁹ Serrano Carranza, "Barrancabermeja; fragmentos y territorios," 19-20.

²⁴⁰ Universidad de los Andes, *Barrancabermeja: plan de ordenamiento urbano* (Bogotá: Centro de planificación y urbanismo, Centro de estudios sobre el desarrollo económico, sección de sociología, Facultad de artes y ciencias, 1979), 24.

Colombian market. Barranca's main lines of communication and trade with the rest of the country were boat and air travel. Medellín, the closest large city, was connected to Barranca by a slow railroad that meanders through the hills of northeastern Antioquia. Daily flights to Bogotá ensured that oil company managers and engineers could stay in touch with national affairs. Some Ecopetrol personnel maintained homes in both Bogotá and Barranca, returning to the capital to visit their families on weekends. While the flight to Bogotá took less than one hour, the road linking Barranca to the nearby departmental capital of Bucaramanga was mostly unpaved, and the journey by bus was a slow slog that could take a full day, depending on the weather. The road to Bogotá was much longer, and susceptible to landslides and indefinite closures.

In April 1963 the director of the state oil company Ecopetrol traveled from Barrancabermeja to Bogotá to seek the advice of researchers at the newly-established Department of Sociology at the National University.²⁴¹ He wanted to establish a social scientific basis for better understanding the dynamics of Barranca, with an eye to formulating proposals for local development. The timing could not have been more apt, or ironic. On May 20, 1963, the citizens of Barranca organized a *paro cívico*, or civil strike, to protest the lack of basic services and infrastructure. The significance of this new social process as a precedent for future popular mobilization is explored in the next section of this chapter. Here it is important to note that thousands of people took to the streets and the city was completely shut down for three days and nights. A *comité cívico* was established by a group of community and trade union leaders for the purposes of

²⁴¹ A. Eugene Havens and Michel Romieux, *Barrancabermeja: conflictos sociales en torno a un centro petrolero* (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo y Facultad de Sociología, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1966), 11.

negotiating with the regional and national governments. An agreement was reached whereby the government of the department of Santander agreed to make major investments in the city. But as the deal was being finalized, rioting broke out during a stand-off between over-stressed protestors and state security forces, and an eight year-old boy was killed by army gunfire. Barranca's first *paro cívico* was put down by force. The Conservative governor of Santander Humberto Silva Valdivieso ordered 2,000 army troops to occupy city. Conservative President Guillermo León Valencia then declared a state of siege in the Magdalena Medio that restricted basic civil and political rights.

The crisis in Barranca was illustrative of deep contradictions in Colombia. How could a country endowed with tremendous natural wealth, skilled workers, strong educational institutions, and apparent political stability be beset by such intractable social and political problems?²⁴² Researchers from the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin travelled to Barranca in the wake of the *paro cívico*. Land Tenure Center director and sociologist Eugene Havens had agreed to co-direct the study proposed by Ecopetrol, in cooperation with the National University in Bogotá, with financing from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).²⁴³ Havens was joined by Colombian anthropologist Michel Romieux, and together they witnessed first-hand the deep divide that was at the root of social unrest in Barranca:

In the case of the De Mares Concession there appears a strange organism in the country, the Oil Company, with all of its services, installations and personnel. When nationalization happens, fundamental changes take place. The struggle is

²⁴² For further reading on Colombian expertise in the oil, gas and coal sectors, see Pamela Murray, *Dreams of Development: Colombia's National School of Mines and its Engineers, 1887-1970* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997) and Frank Safford, *The Ideal of the Practical: Colombia's Struggle to Form a Technical Elite* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976).

²⁴³ "Institutions", *Current Anthropology* 5:2 (April 1964): 118.

now directed openly against the ruling classes in the country, ECOPETROL and the municipio of Barrancabermeja are a microcosm of the struggle developing in the rest of Colombia, the transformation of a semi feudal, semi colonial country into an industrialized and self-sufficient country.²⁴⁴

Colombia in the 1960s was at a crossroads. The National Front pact between Liberals and Conservatives that had put an end to partisan warfare in 1958 did not address the issues of inequality, poverty and political exclusion that had been the root causes of *La Violencia*. The nationalization of Ecopetrol brought these problems into focus.

The critical observations offered by Havens and Romieux contrasted starkly with the sanguine opinions being proffered by the United States Embassy at the time of the unrest in Barranca. In a report to the State Department dated September 4, 1963, U.S. Embassy officials lauded Colombia as a model of stability. Colombia, they said, was a worthy recipient of foreign assistance because of the forward-thinking attitudes espoused by its government, entrepreneurs and middle classes.²⁴⁵ They argued that success in Colombia would demonstrate the effectiveness of the Alliance for Progress. Both U.S. policymakers with a positive view and those who perceived problems agreed about the need for the U.S. to intervene. Colombia would receive \$430 million U.S. from the Alliance for Progress in addition to \$60 million U.S. from the Military Aid Plan, making it the third highest recipient of U.S. bilateral assistance in the 1960s.²⁴⁶

A key turning point in Colombian history was reached in the early 1960s, as intellectuals, policymakers, labour and social activists debated the legacy of *La Violencia*, economic development, and the future of Barrancabermeja. There was, however, no

²⁴⁴ Havens and Romieux, *Barrancabermeja: conflictos sociales*, 18.

²⁴⁵ Jeffrey F. Taffer, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 153.

²⁴⁶ Francisco Leal Buitrago, *La seguridad nacional a la deriva: del frente nacional a la posguerra fría* (Mexico City: Alfaomega Grupo Editor, 2002), 22-23.

basis for consensus. The official end of *La Violencia* in 1958 had been resolved in favour of the country's elitist and exclusionary political establishment, resulting in the marginalization of left-wing and popular movements. As economic historian Marcelo Bucheli observes, the end of the era of foreign domination in Barranca did not represent a significant political rupture. Ecopetrol was not the product of a nationalist expropriation, as had occurred in Mexico in 1938, but "of negotiations between the government and the industrial elite".²⁴⁷ The result was a more intense and direct confrontation between the state and local residents.²⁴⁸

The 1963 Paro Cívico

Let us return to the pioneering *paro cívico* of 1963 and its significance. The 1963 *paro cívico* was an important test of unity between labour and civic leaders in Barranca. It was also an important test of the relationship between local residents and the national government. The *paro cívico* was a collective act of rebellion that allowed *barranqueños* to cast off the legacy of corporate hegemony and express political dissent for the first time since *La Comuna de Barrancabermeja* in 1948.²⁴⁹ The organization of the protest,

²⁴⁷ Marcelo Bucheli, "Multinational Oil Companies in Colombia and Mexico: Corporate Strategy, Nationalism, and Local Politics, 1900-1951" (paper presented at International Economic History Conference, Helsinki, Finland: 2006), 2.

²⁴⁸ Standard Oil remained a major player in the Colombian oil and coal industries for decades to come. In the late 1970s Standard Oil would help to develop one of the world's largest opencast coal mines at El Cerrejón, in the department of La Guajira, in northeastern Colombia. Standard Oil was renamed Exxon in 1972 and ExxonMobil in 1999. See Marcelo Bucheli and Ruth Aguilera, "Political Survival, Energy Policies, and Multinational Corporations: A Historical Study for Standard Oil of New Jersey in Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela in the Twentieth Century," (Working Paper 06-0101, University of Illinois College of Business, 2006), 40.

²⁴⁹ I am borrowing this understanding of the connection between popular protest and political consciousness from U.S. historian Alfred Young, who has written extensively

one of the largest civil strikes in Colombian history at the time, would provide a template for future movement building. The *paro cívico* of 1963 promoted a sense of entitlement, and inspired *barranqueños* to take to the streets to demand solutions to chronic housing, sanitation, water, and infrastructural problems, as well as social rights, including improvements to local schools and hospital facilities. The protest had originally been sanctioned by a broad coalition that included a group of small business owners, Catholic priests and a former mayor. But when poor *barrio* residents and unionized oil workers assumed control of the streets, class and political divisions were revealed.

Paros cívicos are distinguished by the peaceful mobilization of ordinary citizens for the purpose of halting all commercial and government activity for a determined period of time. These “civil strikes” may involve street protests, labour stoppages, disruption of transportation, or the physical occupation of government buildings. *Paros cívicos* typically engage a broad range of social movements and community groups, require the active cooperation of large numbers of residents, and appeal to universal questions such as health, housing, or other public and social services. Political scientist Jaime Carrillo Bedoya defines the *paro cívico* as follows:

Civil strikes essentially involve the total or near-total paralysis of all activity in a city, to demand that the government resolve problems related to public services, problems that effect the whole population. To the extent that the people feel committed, they participate in the protest, which means that the social bases of the civil strike are usually cross-class.²⁵⁰

about the “casting off” of deference to authority and the rites of protest in late eighteenth century New England. See Alfred F. Young, “Afterward: How Radical was the American Revolution?” in Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 317-364.

²⁵⁰ Jaime Carrillo Bedoya, *Los paros cívicos en Colombia* (Bogotá: La Oveja Negra, 1981), 13.

While the *paro cívico* is analogous to the general strike, it goes beyond synchronized work stoppages to engage entire communities. Factories and offices are not just shut down. The goal is bring an entire city, and occasionally an entire country, to a standstill.

In Colombia many of the first *paros cívicos* were organized with the support of local government officials and mainstream political parties for the purpose of making demands on the national government. They championed popular causes such as utilities and public transportation rate controls, but did not seek radical change in political or economic structures. In some Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, the *paro cívico* has been mainly associated with conservative movements or elite attempts to challenge left-leaning or nationalist governments.²⁵¹ The first *paro cívico* in Colombian history was organized in 1944 in the city of Cali to protest hikes in electricity rates, then under the control of a U.S.-based energy company.²⁵² This protest received endorsements from all of the major political parties and unions in Cali. The first national *paro cívico* was organized in 1957 in a successful attempt to prevent President General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, the only military dictator in Colombian history, from retaining power, leading to the transition to civilian rule in Colombia.²⁵³ The 1957 *paro cívico* was

²⁵¹ Recent examples include Venezuela and Bolivia, where *paros cívicos* have been organized by elites against the left-wing governments of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. For a survey of civil strikes in Latin American history, see Patricia Parkman, *Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America, 1931-1961* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Albert Einstein Institution, 1990). For a discussion of street protests led by elites in Venezuela, see Clara Irazábal and John Foley, “Space, Revolution and Resistance: Ordinary Place and Extraordinary Events in Caracas,” Clara Irazábal, ed. *Extraordinary Events: Citizenship, Democracy, and Public Space in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 159.

²⁵² Javier Giraldo and Santiago Camargo, “Paros y movimientos cívicos en Colombia,” *Controversia* 128 (1985), 8.

²⁵³ On June 12, 1953 Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla led a coup d’état against the government of Conservative President Laureano Gómez, at the time presided by

also pluralist and cross-class. For 10 days beginning May 1, 1957, Colombia's Liberal and Conservative parties were joined by university students, unions and progressive Catholic priests in the organization of street protests, labour stoppages and public meetings, eventually forcing the military regime to cede power to a civilian government.²⁵⁴

The first *paro cívico* in Barrancabermeja in 1963 likewise was organized around a popular cause that united social and political groups within the city. It was said that the quality of tap water in Barranca was so poor that it had to be boiled before you could use it to wash your floors.²⁵⁵ Fouled by runoff from drilling and refining operations, the water literally reeked of oil. When the level of the Magdalena River was low, the city was obliged to draw its water from fetid marshlands. In a city with average daytime temperatures in the high 30s centigrade, and humidity often exceeding 70 per cent, the provision of clean water was critical. In a report on the August 1963 *paro cívico*, the local *Vanguardia Liberal* newspaper wrote:

Interim President Roberto Urdaneta Arbeláez. Rojas Pinilla was close to the Conservative Party and had commanded troops in Cali at the time of the outbreak of violence in 1948. Rojas Pinilla had served briefly as commander of the Colombian armed forces in 1951, before being named to the top diplomatic post responsible for oversight of Colombia's participation in the Korean War. During nearly two years spent in Korea, Rojas Pinilla earned the confidence of his fellow officers, thus providing him with the support he needed to overthrow the civilian government. The military government of Rojas Pinilla was initially supported by many prominent Conservatives and Liberals. For more on the background to the coup and Rojas Pinilla, see Russell W. Ramsey, "The Colombia Battalion in Korea and Suez," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 9:4 (October 1967), 541-560. For a first-hand account of the Colombian contribution to the Korean War written by the commander of the Colombian forces, see Alberto Ruíz Novoa, *El Batallón Colombia en Korea, 1951-1954* (Bogotá: Empresa Nacional de Publicaciones, 1956).

²⁵⁴ Medofilo Media, *Protesta urbana en Colombia en el siglo veinte* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 1984).

²⁵⁵ Jaime Carillo, *Los paros cívicos*, 137.

Unfortunately, the residents of a city like Barrancabermeja produce so much money for the departmental and national governments that they have had to organize mass civic movements to be heard in high official circles, which are always deaf to the demands and *pichicatas* [insensitive, literally drugged or anaesthetized] to the solutions that can be found to meet the urgent need for social services.²⁵⁶

Other demands included paved roads, a new public hospital, and a municipal slaughterhouse.²⁵⁷ Indeed, the existing hospital was small and out of date, many of the city's main roads were unpaved and poorly maintained, and there were concerns about the safety of the meat being sold in the city's markets. But none of these issues was as pressing as the question of potable water.

Because of Barranca's relatively small size, geographic isolation, and particular layout, the setting-up of barricades at the southeastern entrance to the city was enough to make the 1963 *paro cívico* effective. There is only one major entry point into the city, and the two main residential areas within the city are divided by a railway line. However, maintaining support for a *paro cívico* over the course of several days required a great deal of planning. Without popular support, the *paro cívico* would have withered under the stress caused by the suspension of work, schools, and the closing of food markets across the city. Organizers went door-to-door to convince residents to participate, held public meetings, consulted, and persuaded social, political and business groups to join forces. In this light, the 1963 *paro cívico* was a key antecedent to the construction of a pluralist civic movement. The manner in which the *paro cívico* unfolded, with expressions of popular outrage and official repression, would set a standard for future protests.

²⁵⁶ "Paro cívico en Barranca," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 10, 1963.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Within 24 hours the national government declared an *estado de sitio*, or “state of siege”, for Barrancabermeja, and the adjacent municipalities of Puerto Wilches, Lebrija and San Vicente de Chucurí, in an attempt to contain the protest.²⁵⁸ The *paro* ended three days later in street fighting between protestors and the army. On the last tumultuous day, a young boy by the name of Alfonso Sánchez was shot and killed by a soldier who fired into a crowd gathered around the entrance to the oil refinery. Protestors seeking to block the entrance threw bricks at a group of soldiers, and were dispersed by water cannons, tear gas and rounds of gunfire. The army later claimed that an officer was blinded in one eye by a rock thrown by protestors. Soldiers from the Nueva Granada Battalion recovered the body of Alfonso Sánchez and took it back to the base, located one kilometre away. This prompted an angry response from some of the protestors and encouraged a surge in rioting. After attempts to negotiate the immediate return of the body failed, there was talk among the strikers of storming the base. Rumours spread that the army would try to dispose of the body somewhere outside of Barranca. Fearing further unrest, the army returned Alfonso Sánchez’ body to his family, and he was buried in a public ceremony two days later, attended by thousands of mourners. The governor of Santander replaced Barranca’s civilian mayor with an army officer, and a curfew was imposed. In spite of the tragic end to the *paro*, work soon began on a modern public hospital and a new aqueduct.²⁵⁹ Thus, while the *paro cívico* ended in violence and the suspension of civil liberties, it produced results in terms of identifying and addressing the basic needs of the population.

²⁵⁸ Sonia M. Rodríguez Reinel, “Barrancabermeja, manifestaciones culturales radicales 1945-1990” (undergraduate thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, 1992).

²⁵⁹ Jairo Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP, 1991), 12.

New forms of protest thus emerged in Barranca during the 1960s. This occurred in the midst of ever more direct confrontation between the Colombian national state and local activists. The protest resulted in violence on the streets of Barranca and a renewal of social and political conflict. This historic effort was followed just a few months later by the first oil workers' strike in a generation.

Resurgence of Organized Labour

“Communism is to Blame for Events in Barranca”, declared a headline in the *Vanguardia Liberal*, the main daily newspaper of Santander, in response to an oil workers strike organized just three months after the *paro cívico* of 1963.²⁶⁰ The resurgence of organized labour in Barrancabermeja was a direct response to the failed promise of peace, democracy and prosperity that had accompanied the end of *La Violencia* in 1958. Following the last major oil strike of 1948, the union had been rendered inert by restrictions on public protest and freedom of association. Between 1951 and 1957, the USO had been banned outright. Sincopetrol, a company union, was established in 1951 to replace the banned USO.²⁶¹ When *La Violencia* ended, oil workers in Barranca welcomed the opportunity for peace and reconciliation, and had optimistically lauded the National Front government as a means of moving beyond partisan politics. In a declaration published in its official newspaper, *El Petrolero*, in February 1959, the Federation of Petroleum Workers (FEDEPETROL), of which the

²⁶⁰ “El Comunismo responsable de los hechos en Barranca,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 18, 1963, 1.

²⁶¹ Álvaro Zapata-Domínguez, “Etnografía e interpretación interdisciplinaria de la negociación de una convención colectiva en Ecopetrol, Colombia” (PhD diss., Université de Montréal, 2002), 158.

Unión Sindical Obrera (USO) and other Barranca-based unions were members, declared: “We support the National Front as a formula for undoing political sectarianism and reclaiming the rule of law and democratic freedoms”.²⁶² The only strike to be organized between 1948 and 1963 was a five-day action that took place in 1960 and that had been brought to an end by threats of mass dismissals and legal action against the union.

The first major strike to be organized by the *Unión Sindical Obrera* since 1948 began on July 17, 1963, and lasted 42 days. Before it was over, the relationship between the union and the national state was dominated by bitter acrimony and mistrust. Strikes were organized by oil workers at nearby private oil operations in Puerto Boyacá (Texas Petroleum) and Casabe (Shell) in solidarity with the USO. Oil pipelines operated by Texas Petroleum and Ecopetrol were blown up.²⁶³ Reacting to the sabotage of pipelines owned by Ecopetrol and the Texas Petroleum Company, Justice Minister Aurelio Camacho Rueda declared: “Communism has launched a challenge to the republic and its democratic institutions, which in response have no recourse except to accept this fact and contain it”.²⁶⁴ In the early days of the strike, the union’s legal status was revoked. A number of union members were eventually dismissed, and the union president detained.²⁶⁵

The USO had begun negotiating a new collective agreement with Ecopetrol in March 1963. Tensions were high during the negotiations, due to a series of relatively

²⁶² As quoted in Renán Vega Cantor, Luz Ángela Núñez Espinel and Alexander Pereira Fernández, *Petróleo y protesta obrera: la USO y los trabajadores petroleros en Colombia. Volumen 2, En tiempos de Ecopetrol* (Bogotá: Corporación Aury Sará Marrugo, 2009), 253.

²⁶³ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 169.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ Romero, *Magdalena Medio: luchas sociales*, 59.

small disagreements that the union saw as signs of bad faith on the part of Ecopetrol. For instance, there had been fractious debates over the extension of benefits to workers' common law spouses, and the suspension of a union member who had spent time in the Soviet Union.²⁶⁶ When the threat of a strike at Ecopetrol surfaced one month later, the main point of contention was not a direct challenge to or disagreement around the collective agreement. Ecopetrol had suspended several workers at the company store, including the president of the union, whom the company accused of irregular accounting and theft.²⁶⁷ The union immediately called a strike at the commissary, during which workers locked the manager inside.²⁶⁸ Although they released the manager within two hours, national police charged the workers with kidnapping. Two days later, as union leaders met with their legal team and considered taking action to resolve the crisis, the governor of Santander requested that soldiers be deployed on the streets of Barranca. The mayor declared a curfew and banned alcohol sales.²⁶⁹ On July 20 the union shut down the entire refinery. The national government declared the strike illegal and threatened workers who refused to go back to work with "severe sanctions".²⁷⁰

The 1963 strike was a war of recrimination, sanctions, sabotage and occasionally violent confrontations between protestors and the police. One Ecopetrol manager, the vice-president of public relations, was murdered outside his home on August 14, 1963. It had been four weeks since the strike began, and tensions were high. Seven union leaders

²⁶⁶ Vega, Núñez and Pereira, *Petróleo y protesta obrera* vol. 2, 232-233.

²⁶⁷ "Delicada situación entre los trabajadores de la 'Ecopetrol'," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), July 19, 1963, 3.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ "Paro en Barrancabermeja," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), July 21, 1963, 1.

²⁷⁰ "El 50% de los Trabajadores de Ecopetrol se hallan laborando," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), July 23, 1963.

were dismissed by Ecopetrol, including the president of the USO and the president of Fedepetrol, a national umbrella organization for petroleum workers' unions. A few days later, the Fifth Brigade of the Colombian army arrested 15 strike organizers, amongst them all of the executive directors of the USO and Fedepetrol based in Barranca. The union organized street demonstrations in Barranca and in nearby Puerto Boyacá.²⁷¹ The army responded by raiding the offices of the USO. Army spokespeople claimed that weapons had been found in the union offices. By the end of August 1963, following negotiations between the government and the union, intercession by the House of Representatives, meetings in Bogotá between union leaders and local elected officials, the strike came to an end.²⁷² The central government had given the strike a high priority, and a settlement was reached. The mayor lifted the alcohol ban and curfew, and Ecopetrol allowed workers back into the refinery.

During the 1963 strike the USO renewed its reputation for combativeness. Moreover, the strike had been declared just two months after the *paro cívico*, which had already created a nervous atmosphere in the city. During the better part of the next decade the USO was affiliated with the Communist Party-dominated *Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Colombia* (CSTC). For the first time since 1924, oil workers organized under a banner other than that of the Liberal Party-affiliated *Confederación de Trabajadores Colombianos* (CTC).²⁷³ The USO would sign new

²⁷¹ "7 líderes huelgistas fueron destituidos," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 17, 1963.

²⁷² "Comisión parlamentaria mediadora a Barranca," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 28, 1963.

²⁷³ Zapata-Domínguez, "Etnografía e interpretación interdisciplinaria," 158.

collective agreements every second year through the 1960s, and avoid going to strike until 1971. But frustration and suspicion during that period remained high.

The National Front, the Cold War and the Guerrillas

The Magdalena Medio region became the focus of Cold War repression during the 1960s. The national government's aggressive response to social and labour protest in Barranca in 1963 set a tone of hostility between local activists and state institutions in the region, namely Ecopetrol and the Colombian military. These events occurred within the context of rising fear about Communism expressed by U.S. and Colombian policymakers during the dénouement of *La Violencia* after the signing of the National Front peace accords in 1958. Such fears were not entirely unsubstantiated. Indeed, by 1965, as we shall see, two guerrilla groups, the ELN and the FARC, established themselves in the southern and eastern Magdalena Medio by building on previously existing traditions of peasant guerrilla organizing, and by making links with popular and left-wing movements, including the Communist Party (PCC), the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO), and students at the *Universidad Industrial de Santander* (UIS). The state carried out military operations in the region and attempted to address rural poverty issues simultaneously. It turned out to be an incendiary combination, and through the end of the decade the main outcome of counterinsurgency, both *militarista* and *desarrollista*, was a deepening of social conflict.

Three eminent and socially-engaged scholars, working out of the newly-formed Department of Sociology at the National University in Bogotá, published a landmark study on *La Violencia* in 1962. They produced a substantiated critique of elite indifference to the suffering of ordinary Colombians, and an alternative roadmap to

political stability.²⁷⁴ *La violencia in Colombia* was directed by Germán Guzmán Campos, an activist parish priest based in El Líbano, Tolima.²⁷⁵ The project was co-directed by sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, a pioneering advocate of participatory action research, and Eduardo Umaña Luna, Colombia's first prominent human rights lawyer. One of the contributors to the book was Camilo Torres Restrepo, a founding member of the sociology department at the National University in Bogotá and a radical Jesuit priest who later took up arms with the ELN guerrillas. The methodology of oral interviews and statistical analysis employed by the project leaders set an example for early human rights researchers and advocates in Colombia. Orlando Fals Borda described the 1,000 pages that resulted from intensive fieldwork as a "painful cry of condemnation".²⁷⁶

Early on in the decade, the Colombian military embarked on a campaign of counterinsurgency aimed at eliminating pockets of Communist and Liberal resistance following the end of civil war in 1958. Less well known was the way in which the Colombian government also sought to suppress social and political movements they considered a threat. The National Front power-sharing agreement between Liberals and Conservatives, signed in 1958 at a private meeting in the Catalonian resort town of Sitges, was an attempt to return to the politics of *convivencia*, when gentlemen settled

²⁷⁴ Guzmán, Fals and Umaña, *La Violencia en Colombia*.

²⁷⁵ In 1958 Guzmán had participated in an enquiry into the causes of violence in Colombia, sponsored by the governing military junta. The commission was comprised of representatives of the two main political parties, the army and the Catholic Church. In 1961 Guzmán was approached by professors from the Department of Sociology to help lead a critical and non-partisan study of violence in Colombia. Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez, "La violencia en Colombia", *Revista Credencial Historia* 110 (February 1999).

²⁷⁶ "Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008)," *Peripecias* 110, August 20, 2008, <http://www.peripecias.com/mundo/599FalsBordaFalleceAgosto08.html>.

their differences over drinks at the *Jockey Club de Bogotá*.²⁷⁷ But it was no mere throwback. Indeed, the National Front was the culmination of an anti-Communist rapprochement between Liberals and Conservatives. As Robert Karl discusses in his history of Colombia during the Cold War, the National Front was not a singular phenomenon, any more than *La Violencia* affected all regions of Colombia the same way:

...the National Front was not all oligarchs, imperialism, and *guerrillas*, the origin of all Colombia's subsequent evils. An era of resolution for one stage of Colombia's unfolding violence, the National Front additionally witnessed often contradictory and indefinite processes that suggest how political power remains diffuse in an exceedingly diverse and complex country.²⁷⁸

Colombia's two major political parties were united by their enmity towards Communism and supported by the United States, and some regions of Colombia experienced the National Front as an anti-Communist juggernaut. The United States government significantly increased bilateral development and military assistance to Colombia during the 1960s, through the Alliance for Progress, John F. Kennedy's anti-Communist Marshall Plan for Latin America.²⁷⁹

In November and December 1961 a U.S. inter-agency team that included armed forces, State Department, and international development officials, visited all 10 South American countries to assess the extent of the Communist threat in the region.²⁸⁰ In February 1962 the commander of the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, General

²⁷⁷ Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán*.

²⁷⁸ Karl, "State Formation, Violence, and Cold War," 35.

²⁷⁹ It is estimated that Colombia received \$1.4 billion in aid from the U.S. government during the National Front period (1958-1974). See Cynthia Brown, *With Friends Like These: The Americas Watch Report on Human Rights and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 223.

²⁸⁰ For a critical survey of U.S. support for counter-insurgency in Colombia in the context of U.S. counterinsurgency policies and practices across Latin America, see Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005).

William P. Yarborough, led a special two-week mission to Colombia. General Yarborough concluded that the Colombian military needed to improve many aspects of its counter-insurgency activities, including coordination, mobility, transport, propaganda, interrogation, and working conditions of rank and file soldiers.²⁸¹ The terms “bandit” and “communist” are used interchangeably throughout the report. Communities thought to be harbouring insurgents should be vilified by propaganda, Yarborough suggests: “People who support and protect bandits should be shown as cowardly half animals pointing out their sleeping young to the snakes”.²⁸² In a “Secret Supplement” to the report, General Yarborough recommends that Colombian civilians and military personnel be trained and equipped, with U.S. support, to “execute paramilitary, sabotage and/or terrorist activities against known communist proponents”.²⁸³ While the use of the term “paramilitary” is somewhat vague, the recommendation that civilians be trained to carry out counterinsurgency actions suggests that General Yarborough wanted the U.S. to assist with the formation of death squads by their Colombian counterparts.²⁸⁴

A series of influential reports on counterinsurgency strategy in Colombia were produced by the U.S. military in the first few years of the National Front period, several

²⁸¹ Memorandum, “Visit to Colombia, South America, by a Team from Special Warfare Center, Fort Bragg, North Carolina (U),” United States Army Special Warfare Center, February 26, 1962, NSF 319, Report of a Visit to Colombia 3/12/62. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ The term “paramilitary” is traditionally used to describe police forces who carry out military functions or who are organized along military lines. Examples of these include the Carabinieri in Italy, the Guardia Civil in Spain or Royal Canadian Mounted Police. In some later U.S. government reports on Colombia the term “paramilitary” is used to describe counterinsurgency units of the Colombian National Police. Memorandum, “Monthly Report of Public Safety Division, Colombia (June 1971), USAID, Bogotá, to USAID, Washington, et al., July 15, 1971, 5. National Security Archive

years prior to the founding of Colombia's main guerrilla groups in the mid 1960s.²⁸⁵ In the wake of *La Violencia*, the Colombian military redefined its purpose along anti-Communist lines. For the first time, armed forces commanders and political leaders were united by a common enemy and supported by the U.S. government.²⁸⁶ Among the new generation of Colombian military leaders was General Alberto Ruíz Novoa, a Korean War veteran who believed that effective counterinsurgency operations had to entail both pacification and development. Ruíz devised a plan to eliminate Communist and other dissident armed groups from key strategic areas through concerted civil and military actions. The resulting strategy, called *Plan LASO*, was officially launched in 1962.²⁸⁷ *Plan LASO* was purported to be a "hearts and minds" strategy, combining military operations with rural development work and psychological operations, the creation of

²⁸⁵ Robin Kirk, the Executive Director of the Human Rights Center at Duke University and former Colombia researcher for Human Rights Watch, writes that General Ruíz has downplayed the impact of U.S. advisors on the formulation of counterinsurgency policies. Kirk points out that the first U.S. military advisors to deliver recommendations on how to pacify Colombian Communist movements conducted their research in 1959. See Kirk, *More Terrible than Death*, 48. Dennis Rempe – a researcher with the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, with an extensive professional military background – has produced a thorough historical review of U.S. counterinsurgency cooperation with Colombia during the National Front period. Dennis M. Rempe, "Counterinsurgency in Colombia: a US National Security Perspective, 1958-1966" (PhD diss., University of Miami, 2002).

²⁸⁶ Leal, *La seguridad nacional a la deriva*, 20.

²⁸⁷ The origins and name of the plan are the subjects of much debate in Colombia. General Ruíz has insisted that the plan originated within the Colombian armed forces. They refer to it as Plan Lazo, which is a play on the Spanish verb "*enlazar*" meaning to link or to connect, and refers to the way in which the plan was a comprehensive strategy that was meant to bring Colombians together for a common purpose. Some critical scholars have insisted that the plan be referred to as Plan LASO, which refers to the "Latin American Security Operation" counterinsurgency strategy developed by the U.S. government in the early 1960s. See Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, "Las FARC-EP: ¿repliegue estragético, debilitamiento o punto de reflexión?" in Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, María Emma Wills, Gonzalo Sánchez, eds., *Nuestra guerra sin nombre: transformaciones del conflicto en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2006), 179.

specialized counterinsurgency units and the formation of civilian “self-defense” patrols.²⁸⁸ However, as Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens write, the “hearts and minds” aspects of the strategy, such as the operating of medical clinics, and some road-building, was a poorly disguised attempt to place military personnel in rural communities in order to gather intelligence, distribute propaganda and occasionally intervene in local affairs for counterinsurgency purposes.²⁸⁹

An end to civil war had been declared by national Liberal and Conservative party leaders in 1958, but localized conflicts continued to smoulder across Colombia. Armed resistance was sustained in areas of Communist influence, most famously in the self-declared autonomous Republic of Marquetalia, located in the central department of Tolima.²⁹⁰ In other areas, former guerrilla fighters refused to put down their weapons, and were treated by the National Front government as outlaw “bandits”. While criminal elements are known to have existed in the Magdalena Medio and other parts of the country, the majority of the so-called *bandoleros* were in fact linked to peasant social structures and to the Liberal Party at the local level. A mopping-up process, described by Sánchez and Meertens as an “authentic war of counterinsurgency”, was undertaken during the immediate post-*Violencia* period. All of the main *bandolero* leaders were hunted and killed by 1963.²⁹¹ And areas under Communist influence would be targeted

²⁸⁸ Kirk, *More Terrible than Death*, 48.

²⁸⁹ Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants and Politics*, 178.

²⁹⁰ For a first-hand account of Communist organizing and the subsequent army attacks against Marquetalia, see Jacobo Arenas, *Diario de la resistencia de Marquetalia* (Bogotá : Ediciones Abejón Mono, 1972).

²⁹¹ Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants and Politics*, 229.

by U.S.-backed firebombing campaigns in 1964, leading to the formation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).²⁹²

During the 15 years of National Front government (1958-1974) there would be very few opportunities to effect change through conventional politics. Presidential elections were rigged to ensure that the Liberal and Conservative parties alternated in power.²⁹³ But the National Front was more than a formal pact of non-aggression between Liberals and Conservatives: it was a multilayered and complex process of narrowing of Colombian politics. The resolution of *La Violencia* did not take place overnight, and neither was it a conspiracy entered into between equal parties. Indeed, throughout much of the war the Conservative Party had been in power in Bogotá. The Liberal Party had been outmanoeuvred by the Conservatives at the negotiating table from 1953 onwards, when Liberal guerrillas in the departments of Tolima and Santander began to demobilize.²⁹⁴ Conservative victories led to the marginalization of the Communist Party, *gaitanistas*, and other left-wing groups that had fought alongside the Liberals. This was the context in which, in the 1960s the citizens of Barranca took to the streets for the first time in a generation and found themselves embroiled in a bitter dispute over Colombian democracy.

While the outbreak of Marxist revolutionary violence in the mid 1960s is linked to the exclusionary politics embodied by the National Front, it is also connected to the

²⁹² Alfredo Molano and Alejandro Rojas, "Los bombardeos en El Pato," *Controversia* 89 (September 1978).

²⁹³ See Jonathan Hartlyn, *The Politics of Coalition Rule in Colombia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and R. Albert Berry, Ronald G. Hellman and Mauricio Solaún, eds., *Politics of Compromise: Coalition Government in Colombia* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1980).

²⁹⁴ Karl, "State Formation, Violence, and Cold War," 106.

long tradition of popular radicalism that prevailed in certain regions of the country. The formation of armed guerrilla movements in the mid 1960s in the Magdalena Medio ensured that the region would be a focus of concern for the Colombian state.²⁹⁵ There was a long tradition of armed resistance in the Magdalena Medio region, from the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902), the *bolcheviques* rebellion (1929), and the *Comuna de Barranca* (1948), through *La Violencia* (1948-1958). The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) carried out its first actions just a few kilometres from Barrancabermeja in 1964. They drew inspiration from local radical traditions as much as the Cuban revolution. By the mid 1960s a growing number of Colombian progressives were articulating a desire for revolutionary change that was very much in step with Marxist-inspired popular movements in other Latin American countries. The *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) began organizing in the countryside to the south of Barranca in 1965, focusing their activities in the municipalities of Puerto Berrío, Casabe, Cimitarra and others located along the Magdalena River. People from all of these areas were already linked to Barranca through commercial, political and family ties.

The Magdalena Medio region was an important area of support for left-wing and dissident political parties in the 1960s.²⁹⁶ In congressional elections held in 1960 Alfonso López Michelsen – the son of Liberal President and reformer Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934-1938) – led the left-leaning Liberal Revolutionary Movement (MRL) to

²⁹⁵ The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and the *Fuerzas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) both have strong roots in the Magdalena Medio region. The history of the ELN in the region is well documented. See Carlo Medina Gallego, *ELN: una historia contada a dos voces. Entrevista con 'el cura' Manuel Pérez y Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, 'Gabino'* (Bogotá: Rodríguez Quito Editores, 1996); Walter J. Borderick, *El guerrillero invisible* (Bogotá: Intermedio, 2000); Alejo Vargas Velásquez, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano* (1992).

²⁹⁶ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 215.

an impressive showing.²⁹⁷ The MRL captured 17 seats, and included amongst its successful candidates Rafael Rangel, the former Liberal guerrilla and leader of the April 1948 uprising in Barranca.²⁹⁸ In the 1962 elections López Michelsen garnered a surprising 624,438 votes, or about 24 per cent of the total votes cast at the national level.²⁹⁹ In Barranca, López Michelsen earned more than twice as many votes as the National Front's Guillermo León Valencia, a Conservative. The Communist Party of Colombia (PCC) held majorities in the municipal councils of Cimitarra and Florián.³⁰⁰ In the meanwhile, the councils of Barrancabermeja and the neighbouring *municipios* of Puerto Wilches and San Vicente de Chucurí were all dominated by the socialist current of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO), an independent populist movement established under the leadership of former military President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla.³⁰¹ One of the leaders of the 1963 *paro cívico* in Barranca was Libardo Mora Toro, would be amongst the co-founders of Colombia's third largest guerrilla group, the Beijing-aligned *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL).³⁰²

The radicalization of politics in the Magdalena Medio played out at many levels. Founded in 1964, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) is perennially described as Colombia's second largest guerrilla movement. It has nonetheless had a profound impact on Colombian politics and on the history of Barrancabermeja. The ELN was the first

²⁹⁷ Stephen J. Randall, *Alfonso López Michelsen: su vida, su época*, Trans. Paulina Gómez (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 2008), 203-227.

²⁹⁸ Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandits, peasants, and politics*, 152.

²⁹⁹ Kenneth F. Johnson, "Political Radicalism in Colombia: Electoral Dynamics of 1962 and 1964", *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 7:1 (January 1965): 15-26.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 224.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 160.

guerrilla movement in Colombia to seek to overthrow and remake the state.³⁰³ This stands in contrast to the “self-defense” forces that came out of *La Violencia*, including the Communist guerrillas that would become the FARC. The founding members of the ELN were individuals who had been previously involved in social, political, student or armed movements for political change in the Magdalena Medio. José Solano Sepúlveda was a Rangelista guerrilla fighter. Martha González, alias “*la Colorada*”, was the niece of Liberal guerrilla leader Gustavo González, who had fought during *La Violencia* in the 1950s. ELN co-founder Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista, alias Gabino, was the son of Pedro Rodríguez, who had participated in the 1929 *bolchevique* uprising. As historian Alejo Vargas writes: “Without a doubt, we can speak about a real continuity between the Liberal guerrillas [and the ELN] ...not only in terms of membership, but also in terms of radical ideology”.³⁰⁴

The ELN operated as a mobile force, capable of carrying out small armed raids. They did so in areas that had a tradition of rebel politics, such as the town of Simacota, where their first *toma armada*, or armed seizure of a town, took place on January 7, 1965. The guerrillas specifically justified their revolutionary purpose as a response to the “reactionary violence” perpetrated against the Colombian peasantry during *La Violencia*.³⁰⁵ The ELN’s message of a nationalist, Cuban-inspired revolution was compelling to many young radical Colombians.

The largest public university in the capital of Bucaramanga, the *Universidad Industrial de Santander* (UIS) was a hotbed of student radicalism and confrontation with

³⁰³ Ibid., 184

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 189.

³⁰⁵ As quoted in Alejo Vargas Velásquez, *Política y armas al inicio del frente nacional* 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1996).

the state in the early 1960s. The UIS was the main destination for the children of professionals, small business owners and oil workers from Barranca. Several founding members of the ELN –including Ricardo Lara Parada, the Barranca-born son of an oil worker – had been activists with the *Asociación Universitaria de Santander* (AUDESA) during the student strikes of 1964.³⁰⁶ In that year, the army occupied the university and prosecuted student leaders in military courts on charges of sedition.³⁰⁷ The guerrillas’ message of revolutionary change enjoyed broad support in Barranca, just as there had been broad support for the messages put forward by María Cano, Raúl Mahecha, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and Rafael Rangel earlier on.

There are a number of reasons why the ELN was able to prosper in the Magdalena Medio, mostly related to the history of political radicalism and armed movements in the region. Historian Alejo Vargas cites the legacy of rural guerrilla movements active in Santander during *La Violencia*, the rise of the student movement at the *Universidad Industrial de Santander* in Bucaramanga, and the radicalization of the trade union movement in Barranca, as well as the influence of the Cuban Revolution that came to power in 1959.³⁰⁸ The ELN was rooted in the nationalist ideology of Rafael Rangel, the Liberal *guerrillero* of La Violencia who led militia in Santander and participated in the 1948 popular seizure of power in Barranca. ELN commander and historian Milton Hernández gives Barranca a very prominent place in the history of the guerrillas:

³⁰⁶ Ricardo Lara Parada, *El guerrillero y el político: Ricardo Lara Parada. Conversación con Óscar Castaño* (Bogotá: Editorial Oveja Negra, 1984).

³⁰⁷ Libardo Vargas Díaz, *Expresiones políticas del movimiento estudiantil AUDESA, 1960-1980* (Bucaramanga: Ediciones UIS, Escuela de Historia, Universidad Industrial de Santander, 1996).

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

Juan de Dios Aguilera, a social leader with the Federation of Petroleum Workers and a third year student in engineering at the [Universidad Industrial de Santander], took responsibility for organizing cells in Barrancabermeja. This activity was very important because of the significance [of Barranca] as an oil port and home to the most important union in the country, with a record of combativity and class consciousness that had been made clear a number of times, and as well because it was an area of obvious strategic importance. Aguilera was able to develop important work that would allow the guerrillas to survive and overcome a great number of problems thanks to the support it received from the actions of the urban support network he created in Barrancabermeja.³⁰⁹

From these shared roots developed a sometimes ambiguous relationship between the guerrillas and civil society, including trade unions, social movements and the Catholic Church. This ambiguity has, more often than not, been blamed on the guerrillas themselves, who have used social movements as “sounding boards for their proposals and a source of militants and combatants”.³¹⁰

The revolutionary fervour that seemed to be sweeping Latin America in the late 1960s, including nearby countries such as Peru and Venezuela, and especially Cuba, encouraged ELN commanders. As Felipe Martínez observed, “...we thought we could create revolution in Latin America”.³¹¹ In 1966 one of the organization’s brightest lights, radical Jesuit priest Camilo Torres Restrepo, was killed in his very first military action in the rural jurisdiction of Patio Cemento, San Vicente de Chucurí, Santander. Torres was shot while trying to retrieve a gun from the road where an army patrol had just been ambushed. A major setback, Torres’ death caused ELN leaders to reflect on their internal rules and practices, in particular their decision to incorporate an unprepared Torres

³⁰⁹ Milton Hernández, *Rojo y negro: historia del ELN* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2006), 30.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

³¹¹ Marta Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica: Entrevista a dirigentes máximos de la Unión Camilista Ejército de Liberación Nacional sobre la historia del ELN, y una reflexión sobre la situación de las guerrillas en ese momento* (Managua, México, Lima: Centro de Documentación y Ediciones Latinoamericanas, 1988), 51.

through such a dangerous initiation. At the same time, Torres' martyrdom made him a legend. They would try to avoid making the same mistake twice when three Spanish priests joined the ELN in 1969. All were well-known for their work with a Marxist group of Catholic priests known as the Golconda Group and for their community service in the poor neighbourhoods of Cartagena.³¹²

Since the 1960s the distinctions between what constitute legitimate (legal) and illegitimate (illegal) forms of protest and political expression has been a major focus of political debate in Colombia. The *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* has been engaged in a war on the Colombian state since 1964. Yet the ELN guerrillas emerged in the 1960s out of Liberal, Communist and other legal political movements with strong roots in Barranca. The history of the FARC is similar in many respects, and it too has strong roots in the region. The FARC established itself early in the Magdalena Medio region as well, with peasant "self-defense" forces allied with the Communist Party in the area around Puerto Boyacá. As historian Alejo Vargas writes, the FARC designated the Magdalena Medio as one of three strategic areas for further growth during their II Conference held in 1966.³¹³ The FARC established its Fourth Front in the *municipio* of Cimitarra in 1968. At the time, the FARC was growing steadily, mainly through political and social activism, rather than offensive military actions. According to sociologist James J. Brittain, the FARC was present in 54 *municipios* across Colombia by 1970.³¹⁴

³¹² Darío Villamizar Herrera, *Jaime Bateman: biografía de un revolucionario* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, 2002), 276.

³¹³ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 202-203.

³¹⁴ James J. Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 16.

New Social Actors Emerge

New social actors, including peasants, the Catholic Church and some of the left-wing political movements described above, emerged in the 1960s. For the first time, there was evidence of a new regional social identity that did not centre on oil and organized labour. The term Magdalena Medio became commonly used for the first time in the late 1960s. It was a designation used during a meeting of high-ranking military officials, held at the Palanquero air force base, in Puerto Salgar (Cundinamarca).³¹⁵ Their purpose was to plan the military pacification of a strategic stretch along the Magdalena River from La Honda (Tolima) to Gamara (Cesar). Prior to this, geographers referred to the “Lower Magdalena” and the “Upper Magdalena”, which did not clearly reflect the way in which the region was developed. All future state intervention, whether through civilian or through military means, would serve to further integrate the region.

When the Diocese of Barrancabermeja was created in 1963 it helped to give shape to the social and political idea of a Magdalena Medio region. The Diocese included 14 *municipios* in the departments of Santander, Bolívar and Antioquia. The Diocese of Barrancabermeja would provide the civic popular movement with solid political support, and a permanent base within the city’s growing squatter settlements. Since the late nineteenth century the area of the Middle Magdalena was under the influence of the Jesuits. Through the twentieth century, the Jesuits formed the only significant socially-engaged non-governmental presence in Barranca besides that of the oil workers union. In 1963 there were a total of five priests working out of the Municipal Cathedral that sits across from City Hall. That number would more than double in the coming years, with

³¹⁵ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 156.

the arrival in Barranca of a number of young seminarians, many with family ties in the region. Most of these young men were trained at the University of Pamplona, in the department of Norte de Santander.³¹⁶

Their most influential instructor at the seminary was a young priest named Eduardo Díaz Ardila. Díaz was himself the son of an Ecopetrol manager, and had lived with his family at the Ecopetrol camp located at El Centro, adjacent to Barranca, in 1960 and 1961. Eduardo Díaz Ardila was inspired by what would come to be known as Liberation Theology, a progressive Catholic movement that gained intellectual and political force with the reforms undertaken at the Vatican II Council in Rome in 1962-1965, and the inception of national liberation and revolutionary Communist movements in Latin America. It was particularly satisfying to Díaz that he was able to develop a close relationship to seminarians destined for the new Diocese of Barrancabermeja. Eduardo Díaz was still attached to the Diocese of San Gil, Santander, but political tensions inside the Pamplona Seminary eventually helped him decide to fulfill his desire to pursue riskier and more creative opportunities. In September of 1970 Díaz was expelled, along with another professor, and ten students. The students were eventually readmitted to school. Eduardo Díaz requested to be transferred to Barranca.³¹⁷ Díaz and others recognized that they had an opportunity to develop new kinds of pastoral work that responded more directly to both the spiritual and material needs of the local population:

When I arrived in Barrancabermeja, I met up with a team of young priests who had been recently ordained and were very enthusiastic. The openness to diversity expressed by Bishop Bernardo Arango gave us space to develop new initiatives

³¹⁶ Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia, “Diócesis de Barrancabermeja” Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia, <http://www.cec.org.co/?apc=ba1;002;.-&x=4743>.

³¹⁷ Memorias Primer Congreso Juvenil Diocesano, “Ponencia del eje fe e iglesia: P. Eduardo Díaz Ardila,” (Barrancabermeja: Diócesis de Barrancabermeja, 2004), 45.

and undertake new exploration in our pastoral and social work.³¹⁸

Municipalities to the north, south and west of the city of Barranca were now part of the new Diocese. All of these areas – including Puerto Wilches, San Pablo, Yondó, Cimitarra and Sabana de Torres – had hitherto been peripheral provinces of Dioceses in distant Bucaramanga, San Gil, Medellín, and Tunja. They were now united.

The colonization of the Magdalena Medio region was dominated by peasant farmers and fishermen rather than agribusiness. Opportunistic homesteaders, many of whom were refugees who had fled to Liberal-dominated areas during *La Violencia*, had established small farms on both sides of the Magdalena River. In 1961 an agrarian reform law was passed that promised to distribute land to smallholders. In the first few years, the reform was implemented unevenly and slowly.³¹⁹ *Campesino* organizations that emerged in the area around Barranca during this period were subject to pressures from the armed forces based in Barranca, and Colombia's political leaders began to worry about peasant radicalization and the possible spread of Communism.³²⁰ In 1963, 1964 and 1965 various local *campesino* associations denounced being subject to raids, intimidation and arbitrary detentions. Amongst the most vocal of these groups was the Barranca-based Agricultural Union of the Petroleum Zone of Ecopetrol (Sinagrapetrol). At their 1964 general assembly, members of Sinagrapetrol declared that Colombian armed forces personnel were patrolling and carrying out spot checks throughout the

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ On 1961 agrarian reform, see Bruce Michael Bagley, "Political Power, Public Policy and the State in Colombia: Case Studies of the Urban and Agrarian Reforms during the National Front, 1958-1974" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1979).

³²⁰ Leopoldo Múnera Ruíz, *Rupturas y continuidades: poder y movimiento popular en Colombia 1968-1988* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1998), 243.

region.³²¹ The peasant economy in the Magdalena Medio was based on regional trade, mainly with Barrancabermeja.

In 1964 peasants accounted for about one third of the total population of Colombia.³²² In significant part, the “peasant problem” in Colombia was viewed through the lens of national security. Liberal President Carlos Lleras Restrepo created the National Association of Peasants (ANUC) in 1967 as a way of mobilizing peasants behind the national government.³²³ ANUC was conceived to address tensions between peasants and the state that arose from chronic poverty and government neglect of rural areas, as well as competition for land between smallholders and large investors. Within its first year, ANUC’s membership exceeded 600,000. By 1971 more than 1 million had signed up.³²⁴ But things did not go as planned for the national government.

Peasant leaders within ANUC educated themselves and their constituencies about Colombian law and rights to land. In short order, ANUC became a school of radical citizenship.³²⁵ The heart of this new activist ethos was the Magdalena Medio region. Growing distrust between the Conservative regime of President Pastrana Borrero (1970-1974) and ANUC contributed to a schism between peasant groups willing to continue working under state auspices, and those from regions such as the Magdalena Medio where conflicts were occurring with the state. The single most important peasant battle in the Magdalena Medio in this period took place in 1967, when the Shell oilfields at

³²¹ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 180.

³²² León Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia: Struggles of the National Peasant Association, 1967-1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25.

³²³ Bettina Ng’weno, *Turf Wars: Territory and Citizenship in the Contemporary State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 78.

³²⁴ Hartlyn, *The Politics of Coalition Rule*, 168.

³²⁵ Ng’weno, *Turf Wars*, 78.

Casabe across the river from Barranca were nationalized. As Ecopetrol organized itself to reclaim the foreign-run concession and Shell's private guards withdrew from the area, peasants invaded to recuperate the land, which they claimed as public property, or *terreno baldío*. The direct outcome was the redistribution of 160,000 hectares of this land by the *Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria* (INCORA).³²⁶ The unintended outcome was the encouragement of direct action on the part of *campesinos* in the region. The Conservative government in Bogotá distanced itself from the peasants' claims and the previous government's commitments.³²⁷ The resulting alienation and radicalization of the peasant movement proved a decisive factor in breaking down the clientelist equilibrium that for more than ten years had prevented violence from breaking out in many parts of the country.

In 1968 Ecopetrol and the *municipio* of Barrancabermeja signed a deal that would guarantee an annual investment of \$100 million pesos in oil royalties towards the city's development, including improvements to public services. Barranca's predicament was not new, but it now had official recognition. An urban planning study completed in 1970 was the direct result of the 1968 deal. The study conducted by the Centre for Urban Planning at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá in 1970 describes Barranca as a city whose infrastructure and administration were woefully inadequate towards meet the needs of its population:

The environment in the city does not offer acceptable conditions for social progress in terms of health, education and public amenities. The local administration has no instruments for coordinating or making objective decisions that would permit it to be an agent of the change that is desired and sought by

³²⁶ Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question*, 43.

³²⁷ León Zamosc, "The Political Crisis and the Prospects for Rural Democracy in Colombia," *Journal of Development Studies* 25:4 (1990), 69.

leaders from all sectors [of society].³²⁸

In the report, the legacy of Barranca's enclave economy is highlighted as the main impediment to development. Moreover, the study predicted that Barranca's population would double within a 12 year period, seriously exacerbating the situation. Despite the transition from foreign to Colombian control of the oil industry, the chronically under-serviced neighbourhoods where the vast majority lived were treated as politically inconsequential. Ecopetrol established budgets for the municipality on an ad hoc basis, as projects were identified. With budgets decided by Ecopetrol, and mayors appointed by the departmental government in Bucaramanga, *barranqueños* had limited influence over decisions affecting their social and economic welfare.³²⁹ According to historian Alejo Vargas, one of the most important factors contributing to unrest in Barranca in the 1960s was the lack of effective communication between Ecopetrol and the national government, on the one hand, and between oil workers and the general population, on the other.³³⁰

In the Magdalena Medio, as elsewhere, central government authorities negotiated with protestors, and agreements were signed. This encouraged more peasants to undertake land seizures, leading ultimately to a split in ANUC in 1971. The new "Línea Sincelejo" of ANUC would have a strong following in the Magdalena Medio. 1971 remains an all-time watershed in Colombian history for the number of organized peasant

³²⁸ Universidad de los Andes, *Barrancabermeja: plan de ordenamiento urbano*, 21.

³²⁹ Colombian mayors were named by departmental governors until political reforms were implemented in 1986, after which mayors were elected by popular vote. See María Emma Wills Obregón, *La democracia: un camino por recorrer. La reforma política en Barrancabermeja de 1986-1988* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, 1989).

³³⁰ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 170.

land invasions: in that year, some 645 land invasions were carried out across Colombia, involving thousands of peasants.³³¹

Conclusions

This chapter is about the emergence in the 1960s of new social actors and new forms of social action as a result of major political, economic and demographic change. There emerged new forms of civic protest in the period immediately after *La Violencia* that would come to characterize popular life in Barrancabermeja, the most important of which was the *paro cívico*, or civil strike.³³² A 1963 oil strike constituted a flexing of muscles by the once mighty union, after years in the political wilderness. Later in the decade, *campesinos* and progressive Catholic priests began to assert themselves. These diverse groups addressed the issues of poverty and authoritarianism in Barranca, and increasingly in the Magdalena Medio as a whole. At the same time, armed Marxist insurgent groups formed in the Magdalena Medio and the region became a focus of Cold War counterinsurgency concern on the part of the Colombian military.

³³¹ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 142.

³³² Pastoral Social, “Experiencia de trabajo: período de 1971 a 1986” (Barrancabermeja: Diócesis de Barrancabermeja, August 1986), 32.

Chapter 3

New Social Movements Come Forward

I have thought a lot about the past, and I feel that my own personal history is starting to open up, and at times I think to myself... what would have become of me if I had not gone to live in the northeast of the city? If I had been a good student, studied hard, been responsible, and all of that?¹

Juan de Dios Castilla Amell, community organizer

Introduction: The Emergence of the Civic-Popular Movement

In a speech delivered live on national radio and television on August 15, 1971, Colombian President Misael Pastrana Borrero vowed to fight the forces of “disorder”. He made no distinction between the country’s social movements and opposition parties, and the guerrillas. In fact, he did not even mention Colombia’s four main armed rebel groups.² President Pastrana spoke of the “subversive” threat posed by organized labour and students. Foremost in the President’s mind was a strike in Barrancabermeja that had begun on August 5, 1971 with unionized workers’ occupation of the country’s most important oil refinery. The occupation itself lasted just two days, but the toll was shocking. A young oil worker was shot and killed during confrontations with the army, and hundreds of workers were dismissed by the state owned oil company, Ecopetrol. President Pastrana described striking oil workers in Barranca as “cruel and cowardly”.³

¹ Interview with autor (Barrancabermeja, October 26, 2006).

² *Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL).*

³ “Medidas especiales de seguridad,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 16, 1971.

Forty-six members of the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO) were tried by military tribunal, or *consejo verbal de guerra*, on charges of sedition, kidnapping, sabotage and torture.

This chapter focuses on the interaction between labour, social activists and the Colombian state during the 1970s in order to better understand the context out of which human rights activism would later emerge. The Colombian state made frequent recourse to extraordinary legal measures for purposes of social control, against a backdrop of counterinsurgency warfare in the rural Magdalena Medio. According to political scientist Francisco Leal Buitrago, the Colombian state treated social protest as “a matter of public order managed exclusively by the military and police”.⁴ The years 1971, 1975, and 1977 were all high-water marks in the history of social mobilization in Colombia’s oil capital, and across the country. Out of the turmoil provoked by strikes and street battles, there emerged during the 1970s a civic-popular movement in Barranca, led by poor *barrio* residents, the Catholic Church and the oil workers’ union. The *paro cívico*, or civil strike, accounted for 49 per cent of all protest actions in Colombia during the 1970s.⁵ Through the organization of *paros cívicos*, new social movement activists would become the main carriers of Barranca’s popular radical politics, interlocutors with government, and targets of military repression.

The 1971 oil strike and its suppression occurred just as new social and political forces were gaining strength in Colombia. The National Popular Alliance (ANAPO), an independent political movement led by former military dictator and self-declared progressive populist General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, had come within a hair’s breadth of winning the presidential elections in 1970. Santander was one of the most important

⁴ Leal, *La seguridad nacional a la deriva*, 39.

⁵ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 157.

bases for ANAPO, particularly its socialist wing.⁶ Conservative candidate Misael Pastrana Borrero emerged victorious instead, winning the elections by a margin of less than 50,000 votes.⁷ Pastrana's victory was announced late in the evening on April 21, 1970 amidst accusations by ANAPO supporters that the election results were fraudulent. Suspicions were aroused immediately when, on the night that results were being announced, there occurred an unexplained interruption in national television broadcasts, followed by a hasty declaration that Pastrana had won. In Barranca, Rojas Pinilla supporters demonstrated in front of city hall. The local *Vanguardia Liberal* newspaper reported that ANAPO municipal councillor Eduardo García Rueda had incited the crowd to "arm themselves with stones and sticks" and rise up against Pastrana's victory.⁸ In response, the governor of Santander declared a department-wide curfew.⁹ This was the only point in the twentieth century at which a third party almost came to national power in Colombia. The 1970 elections and aftermath showed that opposition sectors excluded by the National Front power-sharing agreement between the Liberals and Conservatives were gaining popular support. According to Colombian human rights activist Gustavo

⁶ Adriana Báez Pimiento, "El imaginario rojista y la beligerancia política en el proceso de fundación de la Alianza nacional popular en Santander (1953-1960)," *Anuario de historia regional y de fronteras IX* (Bucaramanga: Universidad Industrial de Santander, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Escuela de Historia, 2004).

⁷ "Pastrana 1,571,242 – Rojas 1,521,271," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 22, 1970.

⁸ "Llamamiento a una caudelosa votación en Barrancabermeja," *Vanguardia Liberal*, (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 5, 1970.

⁹ "Desde hoy habria toque de queda en Santander," *Vanguardia Liberal*, (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 22, 1970.

Gallón Giraldo, the 1970 election results demonstrated “...that the traditional political parties’ influence on the dispossessed classes was considerably diminished”.¹⁰

This chapter is divided into four parts that span the history of social protest and repression in the 1970s. I begin by describing the origins of activism amongst urban squatters in Barranca. The second section looks concretely at the oil workers’ strike of 1971 and the prosecution of union leaders by court martial. The third section explains the emergence of formerly marginal sectors of the local population as protagonists in Barranca’s civic-popular movement in the aftermath of the oil strike. The fourth section looks at the process of militarization of Barranca, beginning in 1977 with the naming of an army colonel as mayor.

New Foci of Popular Organizing

During the 1970s the focus of popular protest in Barranca would shift from the refinery to the street. The residents of poor *barrios* had never before been recognized as agents of social change in Barranca. While the first *paro cívico* organized in 1963 was plural and cross-class in its composition, there was no grassroots organizational structure in the poorest neighbourhoods at the time. This would all change with the dramatic growth of squatter settlements and the consolidation of new community-based processes led by Pastoral Social, the social service arm of the Catholic diocese of Barranca led by Father Eduardo Díaz. Events in Barranca mirrored developments taking place at the national level, as social movements surged in all of Colombia’s major urban areas.

¹⁰ Gustavo Gallón Giraldo, *Quince años de estado de sitio en Colombia: 1958-1978* (Bogotá: Editorial América Latina, 1979), 90.

In 1971 a series of university student strikes gripped the country.¹¹ In response, Conservative President Misael Pastrana declared a national state of siege and dispatched the army to disperse rallies and protests in major cities from Barranquilla on the Atlantic coast to Cali in the southwest. Fifteen people were killed in confrontations between the army and demonstrators on the streets of Cali, Colombia third largest city and capital of the department of Valle de Cauca, on February 26, 1971.¹² But the most prominent and radical student activists in Colombia were based at the *Universidad Industrial de Santander* (UIS) in Bucaramanga.¹³ In February, April, June and July of 1971, the student union at the UIS organized strikes demanding increased student participation in the governance of Colombia's public universities and an end to U.S. involvement in higher education reform.¹⁴ General Álvaro Valencia Tovar – then commander of the Second Division of the Colombian army in Bucaramanga – warned that allowing students to control the country's universities would lead to the downfall of the government.¹⁵ General Valencia was a Korean War veteran who had commanded counterinsurgency troops in Bucaramanga since the mid-1960s, and was wary of the influence that the ELN

¹¹ *Crisis universitaria colombiana 1971: itinerario y documentos* (Medellín: Ediciones El Tigre de Papel, 1971), 18.

¹² Vargas Díaz, *Expresiones políticas del movimiento estudiantil*.

¹³ In the 1960s the first generation of leaders of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) guerrillas had been student activists at the UIS. Vargas, *Expresiones políticas del movimiento estudiantil*, 63.

¹⁴ In the 1960s the United States government provided more than \$4 million to help fund a reform program at the UIS, carried out with the assistance of visiting professors from U.S. universities and Peace Corps volunteers. For a detailed report on the project, see Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, “Informe preparado para el gobierno de Colombia por la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura, como organismo participante y de ejecución del Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo correspondiente al periodo 1962-1968” (Bucaramanga: Universidad Industrial de Santander, 1968).

¹⁵ Vargas, *Expresiones políticas del movimiento estudiantil*, 64.

guerrilla movement continued to have amongst students. The student movement itself was non-violent. Nonetheless, the political sympathies of some of the student groups at the UIS provided the army with a pretext to intervene.

During the first military occupation of the UIS campus in April 1971, the Colombian army detained dozens of students.¹⁶ Student leader Juan de Dios Castilla was expelled from the UIS and returned home to Barranca, emboldened.¹⁷ He was part of a new generation of social activists in Barranca who, over the course of the next decade, would claim a prominent place alongside the oil workers' union. His worldview, like that of many other people coming of age in Barranca in the 1970s, was influenced by Marxism and liberation theology. Radical priest Camilo Torres Restrepo had inspired a generation of Catholic progressives, including members of the Marxist-oriented Golconda Group.¹⁸ Castilla explains:

When I graduated from secondary school in 1967, I went to study at the *Universidad Industrial de Santander*. When I was at university, it was a hotbed of revolutionary theories... It was during this time that I was first exposed to Marxism and to the practices of activist Christians, activist Catholics. I was a member of Catholic Student Youth and became active with the student movement at the UIS. Then I was expelled in 1971. I returned to Barrancabermeja defeated, but having made a heroic gesture on behalf of the popular and social cause. It was the time of great influence of Camilo Torres, of the theory of liberation, of the influence of the Golconda Group. It was a time of great political and social reflection within the Catholic Church.¹⁹

¹⁶ Several hundred kilometres away, Communist Party militant and student politician Leonardo Posada was arrested in 1971 while campaigning at the National University in Bogotá. Posada would later move to Barranca, and be elected to the House of Representatives on behalf of the Patriotic Union party.

¹⁷ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, October 26, 2006).

¹⁸ Spanish priests and ELN guerrillas Jose Antonio Jiménez, Domingo Laín and Manuel Pérez were all members of the Golconda Group. Joseph Novistski, "Radical Priests in Colombia, Heirs to Slain Guerrilla, Have Forged an Open Marxist-Catholic Alliance," *New York Times*, February 16, 1970.

¹⁹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, October 26, 2006).

Not long after arriving in Barranca, Castilla moved out of his parents' home and into the poor neighbourhood of Las Granjas. He spent the next twelve years living and working there as a lay community organizer on behalf of the recently-established Pastoral Social. Living among the hard-working migrants who had settled the neighbourhood, Castilla was completely seduced. His political vision was solidified, he learned to drink and stay up late into the night dancing and talking politics, and he married a local woman.²⁰

In 1970, Barranca had a population of 88,500, more than 50 per cent of whom were recent immigrants to the city.²¹ Barranca's population continued to grow rapidly over the next few years, and by 1978 nearly three quarters of the population was comprised of people born outside of the *municipio*. The transfer of the principal functions of Ecopetrol from El Centro to Barranca in 1969 had prompted the relocation of hundreds of workers and their families. Ecopetrol established a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to the development of housing for oil workers, which oversaw the planning and construction of two new neighbourhoods, Galán and El Parnaso. These two areas near the city centre are comprised of tidy attached homes, some with small yards. They were built a few blocks away from the municipal baseball stadium and the *Club Infantas*, a recreational centre for workers and their families on the banks of the *Ciénaga Miramar* (Miramar Marsh). Barranca was one of the wealthiest cities in Colombia, and these neighbourhoods stood for the prosperity of oil workers. Nationally, Barranca ranked 22nd in terms of total population, and 7th in economic production.²² The city was home to a

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Carlos A. Flórez López and Luisa Castañeda Rueda, *Así se pobló la ciudad: crecimiento urbano en Barrancabermeja, 1970-1990* (Barrancabermeja: Alcaldía Municipal de Barrancabermeja, 1997), 48.

²² Universidad de los Andes, *Plan de ordenamiento urbano*, 9.

modern refinery and national distribution system that delivered gasoline and other fuels to every region of Colombia. But there were few other sources of steady employment. While oil accounted for more than 90 per cent of Barranca's economic output, less than 2 per cent of people who lived in the city were employed by Ecopetrol.

The result of the unchecked socio-economic imbalance in Barranca was the isolation of the majority of the population from the mainstream of social and political life. Many of the residents of low-income areas lacked electrical power, telephones, running water, sewage systems, paved roads and decent places to live. The impacts of such deficiencies were magnified in Barranca's unforgiving tropical climate. Moreover, there were striking social problems that reminded residents of the poor *barrios* of their status in the city. Juan de Dios Castilla recounts:

It was total marginalization. At the entrance to the *nororiente*, there was a tolerance sector. The only contact that people from the rest of the city had with the *nororiente* was with the whores who did set up shop at the entrance to the neighbourhood. Beyond that was unknown territory, absolute poverty.²³

Barranca's southeastern and northeastern neighbourhoods were built on a diverse topography of small hills, streams and ravines coloured red by the clay that gives Barrancabermeja its name. The two main sections of the low-income outer city were connected by a single dirt road on the easternmost perimeter, making transportation difficult. There were just two places where buses and cars could cross the railway line separating central Barranca from the *barrios orientales*. In the newest areas of settlement, *campesino*-style wood, straw and bamboo *ranchos* were common.

The *Pastoral Social*, under the leadership of the dynamic and progressive Padre Eduardo Díaz, engaged a broader network, across a greater swathe of the city, than any

²³ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, October 26, 2006).

other institution or movement. Díaz' presence amongst the organizers of *paros cívicos* in the 1970s had four significant impacts that reflected changes taking place in Barranca at a broader level. First, Díaz helped bridge social and political differences between members of the city's diverse activist communities. Second, Díaz provided organizers with a broad network of contacts, especially amongst poor *barrio* residents, who would have been out of the reach of the oil workers' union. Third, Díaz enjoyed the support of the local Bishop. As director of *Pastoral Social*, Díaz spoke on behalf of the diocese of Barranca. And finally, Díaz brought a sense of gravitas and moral credibility to the negotiating table when it came time to speak with government officials, particularly representatives of the national government.

Of all of the public figures to have emerged from Barranca, none is as well known as Horacio Serpa Uribe, whom the governor of Santander named mayor of Barranca in 1969.²⁴ A former judge at the municipal courthouse in Barranca, Horacio Serpa had a major impact on Barranca's politics for the better part of two decades.²⁵ His actual term in office lasted just 10 months, after which he split his time between Barranca and Bogotá, where he rose through the ranks of the national Liberal Party. The man who replaced him as mayor of Barranca, Luis Pinilla, recalls the advice that Serpa gave him prior to the handover of power: "Luis, there is very little to be done here, because there is no money. Try to maintain the roads in good condition. That should be enough to satisfy

²⁴ Luis Pinilla Pinilla, *Horacio Serpa Uribe: una experiencia, un futuro* (Bogotá: Alfomega, 2002), 25.

²⁵ Serpa later became Colombia's Attorney General, served as Minister of the Interior, and was three times presidential candidate and leader of the Colombian Liberal Party, before retiring from the national scene to become governor of Santander in 2008.

the daily demands that you address the needs of the population”.²⁶ In the 1970s Serpa established a left-leaning populist movement within the Liberal Party known as the Authentic Liberal Leftist Front, or *Frente de Izquierda Liberal Auténtico* (FILA). Serpa understood that in order to stay in power in Barranca the Liberals needed to speak to the poor majority and evoke the radical Liberal traditions for which Santander and Barranca were famous.²⁷ The FILA would dominate Barranca’s politics until the early 1990s, electing a majority of municipal councillors.

Although dominated by the Liberal Party, Barranca’s municipal council included a strong contingent of progressive activists who approached their work in much the same way that social movement leaders did. A case in point was the council’s combative, if ineffectual, response to the controversial election of Misael Pastrana in the 1970 presidential elections. Within days of the vote, Barranca’s municipal council passed a motion denouncing Pastrana’s victory.²⁸ It was a dramatic gesture, proposed with great bluster and approved by a near unanimous vote. With equal zeal, the council declared its solidarity with the recently elected socialist President of Chile, Salvador Allende, and demanded that the remains of rebel priest Camilo Torres Restrepo be returned to his family (his body had been disposed of by the Colombian army in a secret location not long after he was killed in combat in 1966).²⁹ They also demanded that the *municipio* of Barranca host a dialogue for peace and reconciliation with the FARC and ELN guerrillas.

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁷ During the 1998 presidential elections, Horacio Serpa was the candidate for the Liberal Party. His campaign rally in Barranca attracted a huge crowd. During his speech, Serpa declared himself the “revolutionary candidate” and even evoked the name of radical priest Camilo Torres Restrepo.

²⁸ Barrancabermeja Municipal Council Minutes. No.016 (April 28, 1970). Barrancabermeja Municipal Archives.

²⁹ Álvaro Valencia Tovar, *El final de Camilo* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1976), 257.

Municipal council meetings were packed to capacity during times of crisis, and civil society leaders attended the meeting to air their views.

Real power remained with Ecopetrol. Ecopetrol convened a consulting committee known as the *Comité Privado de Desarrollo*, comprised mostly of local business owners, to guide decisions about how oil royalties should be spent in the *municipios*. The *Comité Privado de Desarrollo* effectively undermined the authority of the elected municipal council. In frustration, two of Barranca's city councillors, Carlos Toledo Plata and Jaime Ramírez Ramírez, abandoned party politics in the early 1970s and took up arms with the M-19 and ELN guerrillas, respectively.³⁰ One of the striking features of Barranca's political landscape in this era is the near total absence of right wing or Conservative voices. Barranca's municipal politics were contested between the left-wing of the Liberal Party, represented by Horacio Serpa, and a chorus of radical voices, represented by the Communist Party (PCC), the socialist branch of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO), and later by social movements themselves.

The activists from the community-based *Pastoral Social* projects of the Catholic diocese had a greater positive impact on the mobilization of poor *barranqueños* than any political movement. While political parties supported squatters' claims to land as a means of increasing their bases of electoral support, they neglected to set up development or charity projects that would have any other lasting impacts. A total of 10 urban land invasions were carried out in the eastern *barrios* of Barranca between 1970 and 1980.³¹ These were large-scale seizures of private and public property by *campesinos*, fishermen and casual labourers and their extended families, sometimes involving thousands of

³⁰ Both were members of the socialist wing of ANAPO.

³¹ Pastoral Social, "Experiencia de trabajo," 46.

individuals. Many of the invasions were supported by the municipal branches of the Liberal Party or the ANAPO, often in an obvious attempt to win votes.³² As a result, the municipal government supported squatters' appeals to gain legal title to the land. But the *Pastoral Social* was the only institution with a permanent presence in the *barrios orientales*, providing residents with political support in confrontations with the military and lobbying for the provision of essential services. This was an unprecedented experience in community-based organizing in the city.

The Defeat of the Union: The 1971 Oil Workers Strike

The prosecution of union leaders by court martial following the 1971 strike set a belligerent tone between organized labour and the state in Barranca during the 1970s. The broader outcome was a reordering of popular protest in Barranca that favoured the new power bases growing in the *barrios orientales*. Traditionally, the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO) was the heart of Barranca's popular radical culture. Pedro Galindo, former president of the national Federation of Oil Workers (Fedepetrol), observes: "The function of the USO in Barranca was not just to oversee collective agreements. That was a task. But the purpose of the USO was the organization of society".³³ In the wake of the 1971 strike, the union would enter a period of rebuilding. The repression of the union would also inspire the creation of the first human rights group in Colombian history.

In May of 1970 the governor of Santander established a censorship board in Barranca, headed by Horacio Serpa Uribe. The censorship board demanded the right to review the oil worker union's newspaper *Frente Obrero* before publication, but the

³² Ibid., 49.

³³ Interview with author (Bogotá, December 22, 2007).

Unión Sindical Obrera refused. In response, the army raided USO offices and confiscated their mimeograph machine. Soldiers then searched the refinery, trying to locate union executive member Gilberto Chinome, whom they accused of illegally distributing the USO newspaper. Chinome was found in Barranca one week later and arrested. In an attempt to defuse the unfolding crisis, Ecopetrol issued a press release denying company involvement in the raid on the USO or the arrest of Chinome.³⁴

On March 8, 1971 Colombia's two main labour federations – the Liberal-affiliated *Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia* (CTC) and the Communist Party-affiliated *Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Colombia* (CSTC) – called a national 24-hour general strike. It was the first time that the two federations had worked together since the CSTC was established in 1965 by Communist Party activists expelled from the CTC. It would be a brief and ineffective alliance. Strike organizers demanded that the government increase workers' wages and decrease public transportation costs to meet the rising cost of living. In light of a recently-instituted temporary ban on union meetings, the labour federations' members also sought respect for freedom of association. President Misael Pastrana Borrero denounced the general strike as a political conspiracy backed by the defeated ANAPO party. On February 26, 1971 he signed legislation authorizing the military justice system to prosecute anyone who attempted to undermine "national security".³⁵

³⁴ "Llamamiento al trabajo y la cordura hace Ecopetrol," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 19, 1970.

³⁵ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Republic of Colombia," Organization of American States, OEA/Ser.L/V/II.53, doc. 22 (June 30, 1981).

Following the 1971 general strike, a special commission was convened by the Colombian House of Representatives to propose solutions to Colombia's fiscal problems.³⁶ Oil, the report concluded, was the most viable hope for rescuing state finances. The oil industry was at a crossroads in the 1970s, both in Colombia and internationally. In 1970 national petroleum production was nearly 80 million barrels per year, the third highest output in South America.³⁷ Yet Colombian production was sluggish. There had been no increase in total output in nearly 20 years. It was at the time estimated that the Ecopetrol-controlled oilfields of the Magdalena Medio represented more than 50 per cent of the country's total petroleum reserves. If these and other oil reserves were not exploited, whether by Ecopetrol or foreign companies, Colombia would fall deep into dependence on imported oil.

Just as government officials recognized the importance of oil, so too did the union. Frustrated by the outcome of the 1971 national general strike and increasingly aware of their singular bargaining power as the most important union in Colombia, the USO went on the offensive. In 1971 it began by organizing a series of short and limited strike actions that would give lie to the privileges that oil workers enjoyed and reveal political tensions between the National Front government in Bogotá and activists in Barranca. On July 26, 1971 workers at the Barranca refinery organized a sit-down strike to protest the rescheduling of lunch breaks by management. The first labour action in

³⁶ Colombian economist Salomón Kalmanovitz argues that the fiscal crisis was mainly political. In 1968 the Colombian Congress granted full control over budgetary issues to the President, and municipal and regional budgets were slashed. Salomón Kalmanovitz Krauter, *Economía y nación: una breve historia de Colombia*, 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2003), 249.

³⁷ C. H. Neff, "Review of 1970s Petroleum Developments in South America, Central America and Caribbean Area," *The American Association of Petroleum Biologists Bulletin*. 55:9 (September 1971), 1418-1492.

Barranca since 1963, it met stiff resistance from the national government. Ecopetrol accused the USO of being provocative for halting oil production on such a slight pretext.³⁸ The union accused Ecopetrol of violating the collective agreement with respect to lunch breaks and medical services.³⁹ Ecopetrol president Mario Galán Gómez then accused the strikers of threatening to sabotage the refinery.⁴⁰ The union countered that it considered the refinery to be the “inviolable property of all Colombians” and would never engage in sabotage. Ecopetrol fired union president Ricardo Mantilla and secretary general Heriberto Bautista Gómez.⁴¹ The company suspended six workers for participating in the strike and sent letters of warning to another 46 workers.⁴²

The USO organized a second sit-down strike on August 4, 1971. Though it lasted less than one hour, this time around it involved all 1,700 workers at the refinery in Barranca. More than 100 workers at a pumping station located 1,000 kilometres away in Puerto Salgar, Cundinamarca also participated. The strike at the pumping station at Puerto Salgar threatened to shut down the flow of gasoline to Bogotá, and thus helped Barranca’s oil workers get the attention of Bogotá. The army was sent to Puerto Salgar, and local union leader Ricardo Álvarez was arrested.⁴³ In direct response to the strike,

³⁸ “Ecopetrol inicia investigación: sigue paro de ‘brazos caídos’,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), July 28, 1971.

³⁹ “Carta blanca a ‘USO’ para decretar huelga,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), July 30, 1971.

⁴⁰ “Normalidad en Barranca; no se justifica un paro,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), July 30, 1971.

⁴¹ “Expulsados 4 obreros de Ecopetrol,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 1, 1971.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Trabajadores ocuparon refinería de Ecopetrol,” *El Tiempo*, August 6, 1971, 6.

President Pastrana Borrero issued Decree 1518, extending the definition of crimes under the jurisdiction of military justice to include damages done to “public services”.⁴⁴

The next day, August 5, 1971, the USO commenced one of the most important, controversial, and costly labour actions in Colombian history. Confrontations between striking workers and the army ensued. Union members in Barranca stopped working at 6 a.m. and began to concentrate in strategic locations inside and around the refinery. There were 680 soldiers stationed at the Bogotá Battalion in Barranca at the time, whose main purpose was the defence of the Ecopetrol refinery. By contrast, the police force responsible for all other aspects of public security within the city numbered just 36 officers.⁴⁵ Workers employed water hoses and stones against soldiers at the entrance to the refinery. Soldiers fired rounds in the direction of the workers. At 10 a.m. a 25-year old worker named Fermín Amaya was shot dead. Workers held 16 Ecopetrol managers inside the refinery. Soldiers detained 12 workers who had been sent to get food and water for the strikers inside the refinery.⁴⁶ On the second day of the strike, the municipal council denounced the military response and recognized workers’ demands.⁴⁷ Cut off from food and water supplies, the strikers’ resolve was exhausted.⁴⁸ Finally, on August 7, 1971, the Ministry of Labour issued Resolution 2067 declaring the strike illegal, revoking the union’s legal status, and the strike officially ended.

⁴⁴ “Paro petrolero se inició ayer,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 6, 1971.

⁴⁵ Leal, *Seguridad nacional a la deriva*, 75.

⁴⁶ “Paro petrolero se inició ayer,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 6, 1971.

⁴⁷ “Ley marcial contra obreros petroleros aplica Pastrana,” *Voz Proletaria* (Bogotá), August 12, 1971.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

The Minister for Mines and Oil, responsible for Ecopetrol, Rafael Caicedo Espinosa, issued public statements reassuring Colombians that the refinery was in working order and full production would be resumed quickly.⁴⁹ The U.S. embassy in Bogotá reported that the refinery had been restored to 100 per cent of production capacity two weeks after the strike began.⁵⁰ Ecopetrol estimated losses in the range of 20 million pesos due to the work stoppage. A few days later Ecopetrol announced that sabotage committed by unionized workers had in fact cost the government 100 million pesos.⁵¹ According to Ecopetrol directors, equipment had been dismantled and sabotaged by workers during the course of the strike.⁵² The army, which led the investigation into the strike, accused union members of having taunted Ecopetrol managers with a hangman's noose.⁵³ Further allegations were made that workers had used carbolic acid against soldiers during confrontations at the refinery gate. The national newspaper *El Espectador* published a photograph of a bus that had been painted by oil workers with the words "we don't want blood", cropped to read "we want blood". Above the photo appeared the headline "Threat of the Gallows in Barranca".⁵⁴

The Minister of Labour, Crispín Villazón de Armas, accused "subversives" of infiltrating the union and directing the strike. Santander's Liberal governor Jaime Trillos Novoa flew to Bogotá on August 9, 1971 to speak with President Pastrana Borero to

⁴⁹ Javier Ayala, "Acuerdo en Barrancabermeja," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 7, 1971.

⁵⁰ Memorandum, "Monthly Report of Public Safety Division, Colombia (August 1971), USAID, Bogotá, to USAID, Washington, DC, et al., September 16, 1971, 2. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

⁵¹ "Consejo de guerra a 23 saboteadores," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 10, 1971.

⁵² "Daños por varios millones en refinería de Barranca," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 8, 1971.

⁵³ "Torturados los técnicos en refinería," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 7, 1971.

⁵⁴ "Amenaza de horca en Barranca," *El Espectador* (Bogotá), August 11, 1971.

report on the situation in Barranca. He described the situation in Barranca as “terrifying”, adding “You cannot imagine how people who call themselves Colombian could attack our most important national company and the country”.⁵⁵ He claimed that “outside forces” who “want to destroy Colombia” were behind the strike.⁵⁶ National media reported that the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) was involved. Representatives of the Union of Workers of Cundinamarca, a member of the conservative Catholic Union of Colombian Workers (UTC) labour federation, accused the USO of serving the interests of “Moscow and Peking”, the Communist Party and the ELN.⁵⁷ A total of 46 unionized workers were charged with sabotage, illegally striking, and kidnapping Ecopetrol managers and engineers. The case against the strikers was brought before a military court, known as a *consejo verbal de guerra*.

Court martial proceedings in the wake of the 1971 strike were held inside an army base across the river from Barranca in the former Shell-run oil enclave of Casabe, Antioquia. General Ramón Arturo Rincón Quiñones, commander of the Fifth Brigade in Bucaramanga, set a stern tone in a public declaration the morning the trial began. As he reported in the *Vanguardia Liberal*: “General Rincón Quiñones emphatically declared that he would apply ‘severe sanctions and inflexible justice’ against anyone implicated in crimes of kidnapping, personal injury, damages and attacks against the national economy”.⁵⁸ Of the 46 accused, only 17 were in custody and present at the tribunal. The rest, including the president of the USO, Ricardo Mantilla, had gone into hiding and had

⁵⁵ “‘Aterrado’ llegó el gobernador,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 10, 1971.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “Detenidos 4 líderes de la USO,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 13, 1971.

⁵⁸ “Con gran tensión se inició el consejo de guerra en Barranca,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 19, 1971.

to be tried in absentia.⁵⁹ Except for the opening statements made by opposing attorneys, details of the case were not revealed to the public. Journalists were not allowed to sit in on the tribunal's daily sessions, which sometimes lasted up to 20 hours.

From the reports that appeared daily in regional and national newspapers, based on interviews with people in attendance, we know that the trial unfolded amidst tremendous tension.⁶⁰ On the first day, union activist Ubadel Puentes spoke in his own defence for nearly eight hours.⁶¹ The president of the refinery workers local, Gilberto Chinome spoke for more than six hours, denying any involvement in subversive acts, and denouncing the mismanagement of Ecopetrol and the shortcomings of Colombia's energy policy, particularly what he saw as the lack of a nationalist vision. The union leader accused Ecopetrol of pandering to international investors keen to exploit Colombia's vast, but mostly untapped, oil wealth, rather than increasing public investment in oil exploration and technical innovation.⁶² Union lawyer Ursino Ospina argued that broken equipment used as evidence had been in a state of disrepair prior to the strike, and that Ecopetrol managers were well aware of this fact. Moreover, he claimed that inexperienced Ecopetrol engineers had damaged equipment as they attempted to get the

⁵⁹ On the second day, the trial was suspended because two of the accused, Julio González Ríos and Francisco Martínez, had given themselves up to the army.

⁶⁰ The Bogotá-based newspaper *El Tiempo* published no fewer than 50 articles between May and October of 1971, covering all of the events of the strike and military trial. Never before had Barranca been subject to such intense national media scrutiny.

⁶¹ "Normalidad al iniciarse labor en Barrancabermeja," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), August 24, 1971.

⁶² Gilberto Chinome was assassinated on July 28, 2005 on the streets of the La Estrella neighbourhood in the vast Bogotá popular district of Ciudad Bolívar. Chinome was 64 at the time of his murder. In the weeks prior, Chinome had received threats thought to be linked to his ongoing campaign against Ecopetrol, and his lawsuit against Ecopetrol for restitution relating to the 1971 trial (Public Statement, Unión Sindical Obrera, Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos y Junta Directiva Nacional, July 29, 2005).

refinery running by themselves. Lawyer Ángel Ramiro Aponte argued that the state had no basis upon which to establish a charge of kidnapping since the engineers in question had been sent into the refinery by Ecopetrol, as part of an agreement between the union and the company to allow engineers to monitor “technical aspects” of the equipment.⁶³

Prosecuting attorney Major Hernando Vega denounced the alleged crimes committed by oil workers during the strike and alleged links between the union and the ELN. He quoted at length from the book *La guerrilla por dentro* by former guerrilla Jaime Arenas Reyes, who deserted the ELN in 1969 and was assassinated in Bogotá by his former comrades on March 28, 1971.⁶⁴ Arenas was a former a student activist and a close confidant of martyred priest Camilo Torres. During the 1960s Arenas had been one of the bright lights of the guerrilla. Like Torres, he was admired by urban activists and intellectuals for giving up his civilian life in order to pursue his ideals and join the rebel cause. To the ELN, he was a traitor who had revealed secrets to the Colombian state. In his book, Arenas describes former USO president Luis Ibañez as a supporter of the ELN, who arranged for USO members to contribute five pesos each month to the guerrilla organization. Ibañez, now a lawyer, was working with the union’s defence team.⁶⁵

The *consejo verbal de guerra* was in session for more than 40 consecutive days, ending finally on September 24, 1971. Sentencing took place one month later. The accused were sentenced on October 23 to a combined total of 286 years in prison. Forty-one people received sentences ranging from 2 months to 14 years on charges of sedition

⁶³ “El consejo es nulo y debe ser reparada la enorme injusticia,” *Voz Proletaria* (Bogotá), November 4-10, 1971.

⁶⁴ Daniel Pécaut, *Crónica de cuatro décadas de política colombiana* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2006), 97.

⁶⁵ “Fiscal pide condena en Barranca,” *El Espectador* (Bogotá), September 17, 1971.

and sabotage. Five people were acquitted. The longest sentences were reserved for USO leaders, including union president Ricardo Mantilla.⁶⁶ By the time of the sentencing most of the accused had been found and arrested. Friends and family responded to the reading of the sentences with screams and declarations of disbelief.⁶⁷ On October 26 the USO, oil workers marched silently through the streets of Barranca in protest, and a handful of workers at El Centro staged a hunger strike in solidarity.⁶⁸

The *Unión Sindical Obrera* paid a very serious price for its occupation of the refinery. Out of this historic defeat emerged several major developments, including radicalization of a new generation of trade union activists. Long-time observer of Colombian affairs, sociologist Daniel Pécaut explains: “While the union movement as a whole was reduced and on the defensive, some sectors among the workers were radicalized... on the other hand, the government did not hesitate to undertake major operations in dealing with social conflicts”.⁶⁹ Dozens of striking workers were sent to prison in 1971, and hundreds more lost their jobs. Many workers were forced to leave Barranca and ordered never to return. The Conservative Party took advantage of the political vacuum created by the dismissal of many strike leaders to take control over the union. The centre of power within the civic popular movement was no longer organized labour. One veteran activist, Jairo Chaparro, observed:

The strike was like a divorce, of separate beds for the union and the people. They [the union] organized it by themselves with the rest of Barranca simply watching.

⁶⁶ “El consejo es nulo y debe ser reparada la enorme injusticia,” *Voz Proletaria* (Bogotá), November 4-10, 1971.

⁶⁷ “286 años de presidio para 36 ex-trabajadores de Ecoperol,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), October 24, 1971.

⁶⁸ In 1972 the Colombian Supreme Court took a decision that forced all of the workers sentenced in the case to never return to Barranca.

⁶⁹ Pécaut, *Crónica de cuatro décadas*, 152.

Do you know what I mean? The USO was married to Barranca. But like all marriages, there are honeymoons and there is divorce. When divorce happens things get worse for the USO and for the people, because it is then that the blows are hardest, like in 1971.⁷⁰

After 1971, the city's various smaller unions, church and community-based associations, leftist and traditional political parties all recognized that bases of power had to be built in what had hitherto been considered the margins of society.

In the months following the strike, the Magdalena Medio region continued to be one of the most conflictive regions in the country. There was an increase in attacks on army and police by Marxist rebels, including a spectacular assault of a National Police station by the ELN in the *municipio* of Aguachica, Cesar, located in the Magdalena Medio a few hours north of Barranca. In its monthly public safety report sent from Bogotá to Washington, D.C., dated November 19, 1971, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) observed that there had occurred a sudden “increase in urban terrorism and civil disorders” in Colombia.⁷¹ Based on Colombian National Police statistics, the report reads:

The number of riots or major demonstrations increased from 45 to 79 and attacks against police more than doubled from 30 in September to 71 in October. 642 civilians were killed as a direct result of criminal or subversive activity and 3,842 injured. The National Police effected 12,328 arrests and 6 National Police were killed and 34 seriously wounded in the line of duty.⁷²

⁷⁰ Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero*, 13.

⁷¹ These monthly reports, which averaged 6-10 pages in length, were produced by USAID officers stationed at the U.S. embassy in Bogotá. They included both detailed descriptions of security concerns affecting the country, as well as charts showing the number of security incidents, or tracking the use of U.S. security cooperation, including training and equipment provided to Colombian National Police. USAID/Bogotá, “Public Safety Monthly Report – October 1971”, 1. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

⁷² *Ibid.*

The most notorious incident during that time was an attempt on the life of Army Second Division commander Brigadier General Álvaro Valencia Tovar near his home in the affluent north end of Bogotá, presumably carried out by ELN guerrillas.⁷³ The report clearly demonstrates that an easy parallel was being drawn between dissent, “subversion” and criminality, both by Colombian security forces and by U.S. government officials. The only “riots and major demonstrations” specifically mentioned in the report were student-led, although the causes of them are not described.

The *consejo verbal de guerra* convened in 1971 to prosecute striking oil workers in Barranca represented the most egregious attack on civil rights of the National Front era. While it was held behind closed doors and its conclusion was foregone, the trial of the oil workers in 1971 received extensive media coverage and had a major impact on local and national politics. In 1971 human rights were not on the agenda of Colombia’s social and trade union movements, who instead dedicated themselves to direct actions that challenged the National Front government. In Barranca, popular concerns were very much centred on the redistribution of oil wealth to local communities through improved social services and infrastructure, as had been the case in the 1960s. Ironically, it was President Misael Pastrana Borrero who, on December 4, 1970, gave symbolic recognition to human rights when he signed a decree encouraging the ministries of education, justice and foreign affairs to celebrate December 10 as “International Human Rights Day”.⁷⁴ Colombia’s first non-governmental human rights organization, the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (CSPP) was established in 1973 in Bogotá with the support of activists from the Magdalena Medio associated with the *Unión Sindical*

⁷³ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁴ *Diario Oficial*, January 27, 1971, 131.

Obrera (USO) and the National Association of Peasants (ANUC), amongst other organizations. The CSPP provided legal and material assistance to imprisoned social activists, including trade union leaders from Barranca.⁷⁵

Defeat of the Guerrillas: Operación Anorí

The repression of the *Unión Sindical Obrera* in 1971 was carried out in the context of sweeping anti-Communist and counterinsurgency efforts by the Colombian military in the Magdalena Medio region in the early 1970s. Guerrilla action targeting national oil infrastructure was a particular concern at the time. In October 1971 the ELN sabotaged pipelines operated by Ecopetrol and other oil companies in the Magdalena Medio. Two bombs exploded in Barranca: one on the outskirts of town and another in the poor neighbourhood of El Cerro.⁷⁶ Military patrols of the city were increased immediately, and more than 300 people were detained by the army and police for lacking proper identification.⁷⁷

The 1970s proved particularly disastrous for the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, which suffered a crushing defeat in 1973 at the hands of the Colombian army in Anorí, Antioquia. In and around Barranca the guerrillas were well ensconced. The ELN were the successors of the Liberal guerrillas that had settled and protected the small villages in the mountains of Santander, and they were supported by some progressive clergy, union activists and peasant leaders. They had never relied on their capacity to mobilize a large standing armed force, nor had they sought expansion through conventional military

⁷⁵ Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos (FCSPP), “Historia,” FCSPP, <http://www.comitedesolidaridad.com> (accessed December 10, 2009).

⁷⁶ “5 bombas en zona petrolera,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), October 9, 1971.

⁷⁷ “Calma en Barrancabermeja,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), October 10, 1971.

means. Conceived as a *foquista* rebel force, they sought to lead by moral example rather than control of territory. The ELN's historical ties within the region allowed them to operate with relative agility, undertaking minor offensive actions against military positions and oil lines, and going underground when necessary. They felt at ease in the familiar surrounding of the Andean foothills of Santander.

Early success had led the ELN to overestimate its capacities. In 1973 the ELN consisted of just 250 fighters divided into five columns, which were in turn divided into fronts and commissions, some of which consisted of as few as six men. These units were mostly comprised of *campesinos* from Santander, as well as students and other activists. Designed for mobility, they were able to operate throughout the northern and eastern Magdalena Medio. Through contacts developed amongst student activists, they also had small but enthusiastic bases of support in urban areas. In towns in the Magdalena Medio such as Barranca, Remedios and San Vicente de Chucurí, the ELN organized urban support networks for supplying rural operations.⁷⁸ By 1972 they began concentrating their forces in unknown territory in search of a new military frontier in Antioquia. They did not expect that the Colombian army would mobilize thousands of troops in response.

In January of 1973 the Colombian army undertook an ambitious offensive to annihilate the ELN. To accomplish their goal, army commanders created a new mobile counterinsurgency unit, the *Comando Operativo No. 10*, based out of Bucaramanga and drawing on the resources of five different battalions, including air and naval support.⁷⁹ Located about 150 kilometres due east of Barranca in northeastern Antioquia, Anorí was

⁷⁸ Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica*, 49.

⁷⁹ Colonel Hernán Hurtado Vallejo as quoted in María Elvira Bonilla, *Hablan los generales: las grandes batallas del conflicto colombiano contadas por sus protagonistas* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2005), 147.

terra incognita for the ELN. It was a town with a strong Conservative Party tradition, and army commanders believed its population could be persuaded to collaborate against the guerrillas. By the end of 10 months of fighting, the ELN was reduced to 10 per cent of its original force. The decimation of the ELN during *Operación Anorí* was a major turning point in the history of Colombia's guerrilla conflict and in the history of Barranca. In conversation with Chilean sociologist Marta Harnecker in Havana in 1988, ELN commander Felipe Martínez observed, "Those were years when we paid for the sin of vanguardism, of *caudillismo* in terms of our leadership".⁸⁰ ELN commander Fabio Vásquez Castaño, who served as the commander-in-chief of the ELN from 1964 through 1974, would eventually shoulder the blame for the defeat. Fabio Vásquez was a feared leader: it is estimated that he personally ordered or approved the execution of 200 ELN members and collaborators during his tenure with the guerrillas, including the former student leader and author Jaime Arenas in March of 1971.⁸¹ Fabio Vásquez fled to Cuba in November of 1974, and the ELN began to rebuild.⁸²

The men who emerged as leaders of the ELN following this period – notably Spanish priest Manuel Pérez, alias "El Cura", and the son of 1929 *bolchevique* leader from San Vicente de Chucurí, Nicolas Rodríguez Bautista, alias 'Gabino' – would define the organization's political and military strategic directions for the next 25 years. The ELN would later describe the crisis: "It was obvious that the ELN, preoccupied with

⁸⁰ Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica*, 51.

⁸¹ Alfredo Molano, "La justicia guerrillera," in Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Mauricio García Villegas, eds., *El caleidoscopio de las justicias en Colombia* vol. 2 (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2001), 332.

⁸² Fabio Vásquez continues to live in Cuba, and has never spoken on record about his time with the ELN.

resolving its own internal issues, would not be able to keep up with the popular movement or respond to the political demands of the era.”⁸³

The 1975 Civil Strike: Popular Claims on Social Rights

In a period of crisis for the oil workers union and the guerrillas, new social movements emerged to speak on behalf of the poor urban squatters who constituted the vast majority of Barranca residents. In 1975 a broad coalition of social groups carried out a *paro cívico* around the issue of clean water that would demonstrate an unprecedented level of social engagement on the part of poor *barrio* residents. According to the *Pastoral Social*: “Neighbourhood civic committees emerge in the new reality of the city to play a dominant role in the mobilization [of *paros cívicos*]”.⁸⁴ The *paro cívico por el agua* of 1975 marked a major peak of social protest in the city. Trade union leader and human rights activist Rafael Gómez moved to Barranca in 1975 in the midst of the upheaval at the time: “I arrived during the *paro cívico grande por el agua*... it was big, huge. I think that it was the biggest *paro cívico* Barranca had ever had”.⁸⁵

The *paro cívico por el agua*, the civil strike for water, in 1975 also proved to be a major test of civic unity. Amongst the members of the coalition who planned the protest were groups representing peasants, students, small business owners and professionals. Even the Bishop of Barranca issued a press release in support of the protest. It also marked the first time that community-based women’s organizations, the *clubes de amas*

⁸³ Hernández, *Rojo y negro*, 265.

⁸⁴ Pastoral Social, “Experiencia de trabajo,” 35.

⁸⁵ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

de casa, working under the auspices of the *Pastoral Social*, participated in the organizing of a *paro cívico*.⁸⁶

Even before the protest began, it was clear that the *paro cívico* was going to be a polarizing event. There were many issues related to local development at stake, including improvement to roads, sewers, the electrical grid, schools, and health care. Importantly, the question of political violence and repression of *campesinos* was also on the agenda. Organizers were approached by the departmental and national governments several weeks before the protest was to take place in an effort to negotiate a resolution. The governor of Santander travelled to Barranca to meet with *paro* organizers. The National Institute for Municipal Development pledged to build a modern aqueduct for clean water supply, improve health services, invest in education, and finish the construction of a highway between Barranca and the departmental capital of Bucaramanga.⁸⁷ But no concrete agreements were signed, and *paro* organizers had little faith that the plans put forward by the national government would be implemented. In the end, the national government walked away from negotiations.⁸⁸ The *Comité Privado de Desarrollo*, established by Ecopetrol, representing small business owners and traditional political parties, had originally been amongst the supporters of the *paro*. But

⁸⁶ Juanita Barreto Gama and Luz Estela Giraldo Aristazábal, “Yo digo que ellos son un león de papel y que hay un tigre dormido: Barrancabermeja: palabras, imágenes y relaciones de género,” in Olga Lucía González and Daniel Ramos, eds., *Mujeres, hombres y cambio social* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1998), 148.

⁸⁷ “Comunicado del gobierno,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), February 2, 1975.

⁸⁸ Pastoral Social, “Experiencia de trabajo,” 34.

when talks with the national government broke down, they chose to withdraw their support.⁸⁹

The *paro cívico por el agua* was actually two separate protests held three weeks apart, the second larger and more ambitious than the first. On the evening of Monday, January 20, a large rally was held at the *Parque Infantil* in central Barranca to begin the *paro*.⁹⁰ Official spokespeople were approved by a show of hands, and it was agreed that the protest would be sustained for 24 hours. The city was shut down, and there were no incidents of violence reported. But the national government refused to negotiate. The second stage of the *paro cívico* began on February 10, 1975 at 3:00 a.m. As one journalist described the events: “The announced 72-hour *paro cívico* began amidst sirens, the sound of drums, trumpets, firecrackers and empty pots... applause and shouts”.⁹¹ That same night, police and army reinforcements were sent from Bucaramanga to Barranca to take control of the city. They had to use tear gas against protesters in order to clear the barricades and enter the city. Large daily assemblies attended by 2,000 men and women were held in the *Parque Infantil*, which was re-baptised the *Parque del Pueblo*, or the People’s Park, for the occasion. These were opportunities for leaders of the *Comité Cívico* to assess the energy, patience and agreement of the crowd. By the second day food and water supplies were running low. Overestimating the capacity to sustain a *paro cívico* could prove disastrous.

⁸⁹ Equipo de Trabajo Popular, “El Movimiento Popular en Barrancabermeja,” 83.

⁹⁰ “En forma total la ciudad respondió al paro cívico,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), January 26, 1975.

⁹¹ “Comunicado del gobierno,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), February 16, 1975.

The *paro* eventually came to an end, on schedule, and conversations between *paro* organizers and the national government were renewed. Towards the end of February a delegation of civil society groups from Barranca met with Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen in Bogotá.⁹² National government officials signed a commitment to improve the provision of potable water, invest in the public hospital, and even address concerns around land tenure expressed by *campesino* groups from the region. But this was not enough to quell social unrest in Barranca. In the months following the *paro cívico*, urban squatters clashed with police, rumours of labour conflict at Ecopetrol circulated, high school students held protests, and elementary school teachers went on strike. An attempt was made on the life of a former mayor, and a trade union leader and municipal councillor were murdered.⁹³ In June 1975 the governor of Santander named Colonel Oscar Burbano Chávez as mayor of Barranca. Though he only lasted 10 weeks in the position, Burbano ensured the implementation of restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly, including a curfew and a ban on public meetings.⁹⁴

The *paro cívico por el agua* had rallied together a civic-popular movement capable of sustaining itself over the long-term, advocating on behalf of poor Barranca residents in-between protests, and opening new lines of public debate around issues of concern to peasants. On June 11, 1976, Ecopetrol officials inaugurated a new aqueduct to bring potable water to a larger number of Barranca households.⁹⁵ But the battle for

⁹² Pastoral Social, “Experiencia de trabajo,” 35.

⁹³ “Severas medidas de orden público,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander) August 10, 1975.

⁹⁴ “De militar a civil: Leonel León Gamarra alcalde de Barranca,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), June 29, 1975.

⁹⁵ “El nuevo acueducto de Barrancabermeja asegura el progreso de la ciudad,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), June 13, 1976.

clean water was far from over. People from an ad-hoc *comité pro-acueducto* said that the government had failed to ensure that potable water would reach those in greatest need in the poorest neighbourhoods and new settlements. For the first time, urban activists associated the plight of Barranca's neighbourhoods with the problems being experienced by *campesinos* in the Magdalena Medio and the general militarization of the region.⁹⁶

The Militarization of Barranca

The tendency towards direct conflict between social movements and the state reached a peak in the late 1977, during a bitterly-fought succession of oil strikes and *paros cívicos* that lasted nearly three months. The militarization of Barranca had begun in 1971 with the suppression of the oil workers' strike. The successes of the civic-popular movement that followed again provoked a reaction on the part of the national government. Events unfolding in Barranca mirrored developments at the national level, as popular movements around the country surged. Following the 1975 *paro cívico* in Barranca, the Colombian national government continued to pursue aggressive policies of political repression, typified by the use of emergency legal measures. Liberal President Alfonso López Michelsen declared countrywide *estados de sitio* on three separate occasions between August 1975 and October 1976.⁹⁷ This process reached a climax one month later when the Conservative governor of Santander, Rafael Ortiz González, appointed an army officer as mayor of Barranca. During the following two years Barranca would experience another cycle of powerful social convulsions, including an oil

⁹⁶ "Comité Cívico dice que se niegan plenos derechos", *El Sideral*, June 25, 1976, 4.

⁹⁷ William Fredy Pérez T., "El sistema penal y la emergencia en Colombia," *Scripta nova: revista electrónica de geografía y ciencias sociales* 45:24 (Universidad de Barcelona, August 1, 1999).

strike that has been immortalized in the lore of the *Unión Sindical Obrera* with the phrase: “That wasn’t a strike, that was a war!”⁹⁸

The military suppression of civic and labour protests in the 1970s exposed political and class divisions in Barranca that had occasionally been papered over by a cross-class civic identity, based on widespread bitterness towards the national government. From November 1976 through November 1977 Lieutenant Colonel Álvaro Bonilla López, then-commander of the *Comando Operativo del Magdalena Medio*, the counterinsurgency arm of the army’s V Brigade, served as mayor of Barranca.⁹⁹ This was not the first time that an army officer had been appointed to the top administrative post in Barranca. Indeed, between 1922 and 1976 a total of 10 army officers had served as mayors of the municipality.¹⁰⁰ Bonilla is nonetheless distinguished for having presided over one of the most polarising years in the history of the *puerto petrolero*. It was the year of a major oil strike, organized by a resurgent *Unión Sindical Obrera*. It was also the year of the first major national civil strike, or *paro cívico nacional*, in Colombian history. Both protests were violently suppressed by military force. As former mayor and national Liberal Party leader Horacio Serpa later recalled, Bonilla “divided our

⁹⁸ In 2003 a compendium of all of the bulletins, press releases, newspaper clippings and public documents pertaining to the 1977 strike was published under the pseudonym Paul French. Paul French, *No fue una huelga... fue una guerra...!! Conflicto laboral en Ecopetrol* (Bogotá: Mundo Gráfico Editores, 2003).

⁹⁹ “El Alcalde Bonilla López no permitirá: ‘Los Zánganos no los funcionarios deshonestos’,” *El Sideral* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), October 25, 1976.

¹⁰⁰ In its first 55 years Barranca was governed by 70 different mayors. This figure does not include periods of time when municipal officials such as *Secretarías de Gobierno* took over the functions of mayor for weeks or months at a time. Yolanda Sandino de Hoyos, ed., *Informe de actividades 1977* (Barrancabermeja: Alcaldía Municipal de Barrancabermeja, 1997), 127.

community between decent people [*gentes de bien*] and undesirables [*indeseables*], according to who supported him, opposed him, or were simply indifferent.”¹⁰¹

During his 12 month tenure in office, Lt. Colonel Bonilla undertook an intensive schedule of public relations that included visits to poor *barrios*, the organization of sports tournaments, an agricultural fair, and the creation of a “beauty committee” to lobby for Barranca’s right to send a candidate to the Miss Santander pageant.¹⁰² He also oversaw initiatives that were meant to benefit poor residents, including an unsuccessful attempt to institute price controls on basic food items such as beef and raw brown sugar, *panela*. Bonilla promised to undertake a campaign of moral cleansing (literally *saneamiento moral*). Walking the streets alongside Yolanda Sandino de Hoyos – the city’s first woman *secretaria de gobierno*, the highest-ranking position below the mayor – Colonel Bonilla was determined to expose the “moral decay” that was corroding the foundations of Barrancabermeja society, beneath the din of the jukeboxes in the city’s bars and hotels.¹⁰³ In mid January 1977, Bonilla ordered shut more than 100 bars, many of which were located around the city’s main marketplace, near the train station, and in a small congregation of businesses known as *el Uno*, located in the north end of the recently-settled *Barrio Primero de Mayo*. Bonilla and Sandino informed bar owners that they would be closed or forced to relocate to a designated “tolerance sector” in *Barrio el*

¹⁰¹ Pedro Severiche, “La noche del coronel,” *Barrancabermeja en textos e imágenes* Alfonso Torres Duarte, ed. (Barrancabermeja: Alcaldía Municipal Barrancabermeja, abril 1997), 72.

¹⁰² Sandino, *Informe de actividades*, 16.

¹⁰³ The *Vanguardia Liberal* newspaper estimated that more than 5,000 women worked as prostitutes in more than 300 bars and *cantinas* in the city. According to the city’s Director of Health, the women of Barranca suffered high rates of spousal abandonment, and unwanted pregnancies, as well as venereal diseases and tuberculosis. See Sandino, *Informe de actividades*, 37.

Campestre.¹⁰⁴ This *campaña de saneamiento moral* continued the following month, with more bar closures along the city's main avenue. Bonilla and Sandino put unauthorized lottery ticket sellers and street vendors out of business, and closed cinemas for being "unhygienic" or allegedly screening pornography.¹⁰⁵

Lt. Colonel Bonilla's efforts to clean up Barranca extended to the political sphere. Acting on allegations of corruption, he summarily dismissed six senior municipal officials and replaced them with army officers. Inevitably, he came into a head-on collision with the *Unión Sindical Obrera*, social movements, and left-wing political activists. On March 26, 1977 the USO signed a new collective agreement with Ecopetrol. Almost immediately, the union began to protest the company's non-compliance with the agreed conditions. The union submitted a long list of demands to Ecopetrol concerning the fair treatment of contract workers, access to medical services, and the subsidized sale of meat and other basic foodstuffs. Union organizers also demanded right of entry to the refinery in order to consult with members *in situ*. Ecopetrol responded negatively to the *pliego de peticiones* submitted by the USO.¹⁰⁶ The USO also accused the company of offering workers wage increases on the condition that they renounce their union membership. Eventually, the USO called hour-long sit-down strikes on July 26 and again on August 5.

On August 12, Colombian Minister of Labour Oscar Montoya issued a resolution suspending the legal status of the USO for a period of two months.¹⁰⁷ Thirteen days later, on August 25, 1971, a full-fledged strike began. From the outset the USO

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁶ Vega, Núñez and Pereira, *Petróleo y protesta* vol. 2, 327.

¹⁰⁷ French, *No fue una huelga*, 14.

attempted to make clear that its grievances were mainly concerned with major political issues. Besides the long litany of complaints against the company for its treatment of oil workers, the USO positioned itself as the defender of national interests. Specifically, it complained that Ecopetrol was unlawfully lending drilling equipment to foreign companies operating in the Magdalena Medio. It also accused Ecopetrol of allowing Colombian workers to be “super-exploited” by foreign oil companies.¹⁰⁸ The USO demanded the immediate restoration of the union’s legal standing, as well as amnesty for four jailed union members and the company’s compliance with the collective agreement. The strike was comprehensive, shutting down not only the refinery at Barranca, but Ecopetrol installations in El Centro, Cantagallo (Bolívar), Casabe (Yondó, Antioquia), and Tibú and Cicuco (Norte de Santander). The union highlighted the arbitrary manner in which Ecopetrol interests, including natural gas reserves in the department of La Guajira and a poliethanol processing plant, had recently been sold to U.S. companies.

The strike was the focus of political debate in Barranca 24-hours a day, with updates provided by the opposing sides through radio, newspapers and pamphlets. Initially, there was a strong sense of unity amongst *barranqueños* in support of the oil workers. In dozens of comunicués published throughout the strike, the union kept its members informed about the growing level of confrontation with the Colombian state. They accused the mayor of utilizing door-to-door salesmen and taxi drivers as intelligence operatives to retrieve information that could undermine the strike.¹⁰⁹ All of Barranca’s political parties, including the Communists, ANAPO, Conservatives and Liberals, sent a letter on September 5 to President Alfonso López Michelsen in which

¹⁰⁸ Vega, Núñez and Pereira, *Petróleo y protesta* vol. 2, 327.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

they called for the removal of Lt. Colonel Bonilla as mayor. In the missive they declared their support for the USO and the legitimacy of the strike. They accused Lt. Colonel Bonilla of ordering the arbitrary harassment of workers and raids on private homes and union-owned clubs and offices.¹¹⁰

The conflict in Barranca came to a head in September during the lead-up to a *paro cívico nacional*. The oil strike was now into its second week, and nerves were beginning to fray. The supervisor of the Barranca refinery, Ismael Rincón Rodríguez, was assassinated. Bombs were set off in the city, including several at the homes of oil workers.¹¹¹ The mayor accused the union of intimidating workers who refused to participate in strike activities, distributing incendiary leaflets, throwing stones and even shooting at the homes and vehicles of Ecopetrol officials.¹¹² A group of young activist lawyers – including a future founder of the human rights organization CREDHOS, Jorge Gómez Lizarazo – published a letter accusing Lt. Colonel Bonilla of excesses in the name of public order, including the unnecessary extension of a curfew and other restrictions of basic freedoms.¹¹³ Then the *paro cívico nacional* took place on September 14, with massive participation on the part of Barranca residents. On September 15, Horacio Serpa, who divided his time between Barranca and Bogotá, publicly declared his opposition to the *paro cívico nacional* at a special meeting convened at city hall the day following the protest. The Chamber of Commerce also weighed into the debate against the *paro cívico*, in support of the mayor.

¹¹⁰ Sandino, *Informe de actividades*, 133.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 138.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 145.

The last weeks of the strike were carried out amidst terrible repression, political divisions, and violence. By the same token, there were signs that many barranqueños were still supportive of the union. On October 3 and 4, 1977, a *paro cívico* in solidarity with striking workers was organized jointly by the civic popular movement and the USO. Police and armed forces personnel patrolled the streets of the city, enforcing a curfew from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. and prohibiting any political or union organizing meetings. It became commonplace for police or soldiers to stop people in the street to search their personal belongings or demand to see official identification. Twenty-five people were detained and arrested under the stipulations of recently-passed national security legislation, on charges related to the organization of the *paro cívico nacional*.¹¹⁴ According to Presidential Decree 2004 of 1977, all persons that “organize or foment in any way” interruptions of normal labour activities such as strikes or *paros cívicos* could be subject to detention for up to 180 days without trial, on orders from political officials including mayors or departmental governors.¹¹⁵ Over the next few weeks, it was reported that an additional 100 people were detained. Some of the young people detained after the *paro cívico* were made to help clean the streets of the city, sweeping the main avenues clear of the tacks that had been thrown by protestors to discourage the circulation of cars and other vehicles.¹¹⁶ Alcohol sales were banned for several weeks.

The USO strike finally came to an end on October 29, 1977, more than two months after it began. During the 1977 USO strike, thousands of soldiers were sent to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 147.

¹¹⁵ Sandino, *Informe de actividades*, 153.

¹¹⁶ The practice of throwing tacks and staples onto the streets during *paros cívicos* or strikes was common across Colombia, and was used by protestors in Barranca well into the 1990s. For a detailed discussion of the tactics employed by oil workers in 1977, see Vega, Núñez and Pereira, *Petróleo y protesta* vol. 2, 324-346.

Barranca, public meetings were declared illegal, and strike leaders were thrown in jail. A total of 217 Ecopetrol workers were dismissed. During the final weeks, the strike had to be organized clandestinely. The union moved its headquarters every couple of days to avoid being shut down by authorities, and meetings of the union's executive committee were held in different venues.¹¹⁷ Many union members were caught up in the dragnet of official repression.

The long hot season of protest in Barranca was finally coming to an end. But all of this social conflict was a mere prelude for the much more violent decade to come. The union was depleted, and the civic-popular movement was facing the cruel reality of a new national security policy as applied in Barranca. The National Security Statute was adopted by Liberal President Julio César Turbay Ayala in September 1978 to counter alleged threats to national security with strict rules about freedom of association and assembly. Decree 1923 empowered the Colombian armed forces to arrest and prosecute Colombian citizens for organizing meetings deemed to be of a subversive nature.¹¹⁸ One of Colombia's leading human rights organizations, the *Comisión Colombiana de Juristas*, has estimated that a total of 8,000 people were legally prosecuted under the National Security Statute during President Turbay's term in office between 1978 and 1982, most of them by court martial.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Equipo de Trabajo Popular, "El Movimiento Popular en Barrancabermeja," 86.

¹¹⁸ As cited in Santos and García, *El caleidoscopio de las justicias* vol.2, 322.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

Conclusions

The 1970s were a period of setbacks for *Unión Sindical Obrera*. In strikes held in 1971 and 1977 all of the main leaders of Barranca's trade union movement were removed from their positions, arrested, imprisoned, or exiled. A civic-popular movement emerged in the middle of the decade that succeeded in mobilizing grassroots community groups in the poor *barrios* on the outskirts of the city. During the course of historic civic protests in 1975 there were attempts to build a coalition that crossed class and occupational lines in Barranca. But if the question of local development was indeed a shared value, the means of achieving this goal proved divisive. By the end of the decade, Barranca remained a focus of attention for the national government, and the suspension of civil liberties was made permanent. Into the next decade, the civic-popular movement would become the focus of national attention, both in terms of building solidarity amongst popular *barranqueños*, and in terms of conflict with the state. In October 1983 representatives of a newly-established civic-popular movement coalition, the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*, would attend the First National Congress of Civic Movements, in Bogotá. Civic coalitions from six regions of Colombia were represented at the two-day event, at which a national platform was discussed. The main thrust of the meeting was to identify the problems affecting poor urban Colombians, from water services to unemployment. Colombia's regional political diversity was reflected in civic movements, and for several years into the next decade, civic movements would continue to meet on a national level to exchange experiences and information.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Foro Nacional por Colombia, *Primer congreso nacional de movimientos cívicos: memoria* (Bogotá: October 1983).

PART III: Dirty War (1980-1993)

Chapter 4

Violence in the Countryside and the Transformation of a Company Town

They started to kill us everywhere. I realised that I could not go on living in my home town, so I had to leave in disguise. We went to a small town called Puerto Claver, where I spent six months. I never felt comfortable. So we went to Barranca. When we arrived, we met up with many *campesinos* who were our friends, neighbours who had fled looking for refuge. They were living in different *barrios*. In all of the *barrios* in Barrancabermeja you find displaced people, but in El Progreso there were 23 families from the same village where I used to live.¹

Campesino leader displaced from Vuelta Acuña, Santander to Barrancabermeja in 1984

Introduction: Internal Displacement and the Genesis of Human Rights

The massacre of eight *campesinos* on January 20, 1985 in Vuelta Acuña – a small farming and fishing settlement located in Cimitarra, in the department of Santander – was a wake up call for Barranca-based social movement activists. Carried out by a combined force of military and paramilitary troops, the Vuelta Acuña massacre was a defining moment, after which the history of the city of Barrancabermeja became incontrovertibly linked to armed conflict.² Consequently, human rights would emerge as an important paradigm of protest in the Colombian oil capital. Following the massacre, hundreds of people from Vuelta Acuña were joined by hundreds more from the Cimitarra River Valley, southern Bolívar and settlements along the Opón River in a mass exodus to

¹ Martha Arenas Obregón, *Cerrando fronteras: historias contadas del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja: Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio, 1999), 54.

² Paramilitary organizing by political party bosses and large landholders had been a major factor in the Magdalena Medio during *La Violencia*. Conservative paramilitaries called *contrachusmas* carried out assassinations and massacres. See Darío Betancourt and Martha L. García, *Matones y cuadrilleros: origen y evolución de la violencia en el occidente colombiano* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores e Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1990).

Barranca to protest paramilitary terror in the region.³ The central government in Bogotá set up a commission of enquiry, charged with carrying out an *in situ* assessment of events unfolding in the area around Vuelta Acuña. For the individuals who participated in the commission, including several social activists from Barranca, it was a powerful introduction to human rights work.

Barrancabermeja's human rights movement was the product of the encounter between violence-affected rural communities and urban social movements. It was a gradual process that began in the 1970s with the growth of social movement organizing amongst *campesino* migrants living in squatter settlements on the outskirts of the city, some of whom had been displaced by conflict between the Colombian military and Marxist guerrillas. But the first major turning point was in the early 1980s with the onset of paramilitary violence directed against *campesinos* and left-wing political activists in rural areas. A counterinsurgency war carried out by paramilitaries working with the Colombian army and funded by local elites devastated Puerto Berrío, Puerto Boyacá, Cimitarra and other *municipios* to the south of Barranca.⁴ Tens of thousands of migrants

³ "Nuevo éxodo campesino y jornada por la vida: defender la paz en la región," *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio*, 1:4 (1988), 1.

⁴ Some of the best original academic research into the development of paramilitarism looks at regional dynamics within the wider context of political violence in Colombia. See Carlos Medina Gallego and Mireya Téllez Ardila, *La violencia parainstitucional: paramilitar y parapolicial en Colombia* (Bogotá: Rodríguez Quito Editores, 1994); Carlos Medina Gallego, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico en Colombia: Origen, desarrollo y consolidación, el caso "Puerto Boyacá"* (Bogotá: Editorial Documentos Periodísticos, 1990); Mauricio Romero, "Changing Identities and Contested Setting: Regional Elites and the Paramilitaries in Colombia", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 14:1 (2000) 51-70; Mauricio Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas: 1982-2003* (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, 2003); Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

abandoned the war-torn countryside to take up residence in the city.⁵ Villages were progressively evacuated as threatened individuals fled in search of safety. At the height of violence in the region, between 1984 and 1985, the population of Barranca increased by 22 per cent, from 128,685 to 156,917.⁶

In this period, Barranca cast off its “company town” past, as internally displaced peasants, seeking political recognition, called on the Colombian government to uphold their human rights.⁷ The oil workers’ union had been weakened during the repression of the 1971 and 1977 strikes, leaving space for other social actors to assert themselves. As the number of the poor squatters grew, the importance of new social movements increased.⁸ In 1980 there were 48 officially recognized *barrios* in the city of Barranca. By 1985 there were about twice as many. Eighty per cent of the new neighbourhoods were established through land invasions organized by migrants fleeing the countryside because of death threats, selective assassinations or massacres.⁹ The peasants who came

⁵According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, drafted by Sudanese diplomat and academic Frances M. Deng: “...internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border”. Francis Deng, “The guiding principles on internal displacement”. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.1, February 11. New York, NY: United Nations.

⁶ Serrano Carranza, “Barrancabermeja: fragmentos y territorios”, 33.

⁷ Internal displacement due to political violence dates back to the Spanish conquest, but was not formally recognized as a major crisis until the 1990s. According to the leading non-governmental authority on internal displacement in Colombia, the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), which was founded in 1992, some 380,863 Colombians were forced from their homes in 2008 (an increase of nearly 25 per cent from 2007, and the highest level since 2002, when the number of displaced was greater than 400,000). Consultoría para los derechos humanos y el desplazamiento, “Víctimas emergentes,” *Codhes Informa* 75 (April 22, 2009).

⁸ Vega, Núñez and Pereira, *Petróleo y protesta* vol. 2, 352.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73

to Barranca during the early 1980s did not seek merely to escape the violence. Many took part in organized mass migrations that they dubbed *éxodos campesinos*. These were both survival strategies and forms of protest. *Campesinos* squatted public buildings in Barranca in order to call attention to their plight and demanded that the national government in Bogotá guarantee their safety. They were stigmatized by military authorities in the city because they had come from areas with a guerrilla presence. They had no work, nowhere to live, and dim prospects of returning to their farms. By their very presence, they raised public awareness around political violence. They both identified with and transformed the city's civic popular movement.

This was a time of powerful indignation toward the state. The repression of the oil workers' union in the 1970s had been severe, and the national government was perceived as preventing the realization of social justice in Barranca. Barranca-based activists looked to the Sandinista revolutionary victory in Nicaragua in 1979 and the persistence of movements of national liberation in other parts of Latin America for inspiration. Yolanda Becerra¹⁰ recalls that when she became active in the city's student and women's movements in her early 20s, the prospects for social and political change seemed immediate:

I got married in 1981, and I didn't have children until 1984 because I thought that social change was about to happen. I didn't want to be tied up with raising children ... first I am going to do this, and then I'll have children. Because we didn't see it happening tomorrow, it was going to happen today! This hope... to see this door opening up. That motivated us, made us strong. Dreaming of the

¹⁰ Since 1988 Yolanda Becerra has been the president of the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP), a regional social service and advocacy group headquartered in Barranca, with hundreds of members throughout the Magdalena Medio. The OFP was founded in 1972 by Catholic Church activists and has been an independent non-governmental organization since 1987.

world, dreaming of many things.¹¹

There was tremendous faith in the power of popular protest and an almost unassailable conviction amongst many in Barranca that the opportunity for transforming Colombian society was ripe. Events in the countryside, and the arrival of displaced *campesinos*, underscored this belief.

Amongst the Barranca residents who took up the cause of human rights were veterans of past struggles and young people such as Becerra, and their processes of coming to consciousness around human rights varied in ways that recall other Latin American experiences. The original title of the autobiography of Nobel Peace Prize winner and Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum, published in Spanish in 1983, was *My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This is How My Consciousness was Raised*.¹² The stories told by human rights defenders in Barranca are reminiscent of Menchú's best-selling autobiography. Like Menchú, many of the individuals interviewed for this dissertation came of age amidst political turmoil. Many had activist parents and neighbours, and were socialized by the confrontation between local social movements and the state. And many, like Menchú, experienced violence and loss first-hand. Non-activists also experience traumatic events that inspired them to become human rights activists, sometimes against the grain of class or cultural expectations. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is the case of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina,

¹¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 10, 2006).

¹² Rigoberta Menchú Tum, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchu y así me nació la conciencia* (San Salvador: Arcoiris, 1983).

whose members include veteran activists as well as mothers who became activists only after losing a son or daughter.¹³

This chapter brings together multiple personal, local and national histories that constitute the origins of human rights organizing in Barranca. The purpose is to explore the transformation that took place in Barranca with the advance of paramilitarism. Barranca's early human rights activists narrate journeys through fear, anger, and frustration. In the countryside, embattled activists mobilized their communities around the issue of violence. As paramilitary violence encroached on Barranca, social movement leaders in the city would address the issue directly. Grassroots resistance to paramilitary violence resonated beyond the Magdalena Medio region, as national and international NGOs, the Organization of American States and the United Nations also began to take steps to address the question of human rights in the region.

The Human Rights Crucible in Colombia

There is a direct line between popular responses to official government repression of social protest in Barrancabermeja, counterinsurgency violence in the surrounding countryside, and human rights activism. The Colombian national human rights movement was born in the early 1970s, at a time of highly conflictive relations between the state and civil society. The first Colombian human rights organization, the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (CSPP), was established in 1973 to defend the rights of jailed social activists and guerrillas, including trade unionists from

¹³ Colombia's Association for the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) and sister organizations throughout Latin America are similarly mixed in composition. ASFADDES was established in Bogotá in 1982 by the relatives of 13 disappeared university student activists.

the *Unión Sindical Obrera*. A number of luminaries, including Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, participated in its creation. The CSPP is credited with issuing the first “urgent action” out of Colombia addressed to the international community.¹⁴ The Permanent Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, a Bogotá-based NGO with a broad mandate to defend human rights throughout Colombia was established in 1979 by a group of more than 50 organizations and individuals in response to rising concerns about political violence, and the 1978 National Security Statute, or *Estatuto de Seguridad Nacional*, passed into law by President Turbay Ayala.¹⁵ Some 38 members of the Permanent Committee were killed in the first 25 years of the group’s history, including four from the Magdalena Medio region.¹⁶

In the late 1970s, political repression in Colombia had also begun to get the attention of international human rights groups. The United Nations denounced Turbay Ayala’s National Security Statute as being in violation of Colombia’s signed commitment to uphold the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights signed by UN members states in 1966.¹⁷ Amnesty International carried out its first mission to Colombia in 1979 to investigate allegations of torture, arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings by the Colombian state.¹⁸ The following year the Inter-American Commission on Human

¹⁴ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 80.

¹⁵ Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, *Derechos humanos en Colombia. Veinticinco años. Itinerario de una historia*, (Bogotá: Panamericana Formas e Impresos S.A., 2004), 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁷ Consuelo Salgar de Montejo, “Observaciones del Comité de Derechos Humanos”, Comunicación 64 (Organización de Naciones Unidas, Comité de Derechos Humanos, December 18, 1979).

¹⁸ Headquartered in London, UK, Amnesty International was established in 1961 as a volunteer-driven activist organization that reports on states’ compliance with international human rights norms and advocates on behalf of individual human rights

Rights would undertake its first visit to Colombia.¹⁹ In August 1980 Amnesty International submitted a 258-page report to the Colombian government, detailing more than 600 individual cases of abuse, backed by archival, testimonial and forensic evidence.²⁰ A medical doctor traveled as part of the Amnesty team, undertaking examinations of 27 alleged victims of torture in 11 prisons, two military detention centres, and two hospitals in seven different cities. The Amnesty and Inter-American Commission visits seemed to demonstrate that the Colombian government was open to addressing human rights. After all, the government had allowed Amnesty International to carry out its mission without impediment. And the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights required an official invitation. Nonetheless, President Julio César Turbay Ayala described the Amnesty International report as “libellous” and an affront to Colombian sovereignty, adding that the international human rights experts had undertaken their work with a “belligerent spirit”.²¹

President Turbay Ayala governed Colombia under a permanent state of siege, allowing military authorities to overrule local civilian government on issues of public order and security in conflict areas, restricting freedom of movement in the name of

defenders who are imprisoned or experience death threats. For background on Amnesty International, see Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights constitute the investigative and deliberative branches of a regional justice system with jurisdiction in the 33 member states of the Organization of American States (OAS). Together they have delivered hundreds of judgments, and undertaken dozens of on-site investigations since the OAS was created in 1948.

²⁰ Amnesty Internacional, *Violación de los derechos humanos en Colombia: informe de Amnistía Internacional* (Bogotá: Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, 1980).

²¹ Amnesty International. *Amnesty International Report 1981* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1981), 129.

counterinsurgency, and ceding power to paramilitary groups.²² As the international human rights organization Americas Watch reported in 1986, “Military power reached its zenith during the Turbay administration... Backed by state of siege powers... the armed forces attacked guerrillas and their alleged supporters including the Communist Party”.²³ The Turbay Ayala regime allowed the main work of counterinsurgency to be carried out by private armies known by the initials MAS (Death to Kidnappers) and AAA (American Anticommunist Alliance), amongst others.²⁴ The most prominent of the new paramilitary groups, “MAS” was a direct precursor of the national paramilitary movement that would gain force in Colombia through the end of the 1990s.²⁵ For Turbay Ayala, the advent of paramilitarism was a convenient way to avoiding international scrutiny.

The link between Colombian military officials and paramilitaries was revealed during the very early stages of this process. On July 20, 1980, just a few short weeks before Amnesty International released its first major report on Colombia, five Colombian army officers released a remorseful open statement admitting their participation in the American Anticommunist Alliance (AAA). An antecedent of MAS, the AAA was established in 1978 by Jorge Robledo Pulido, then commander of the Colombian armed forces. The Colombian officers who had confessed their participation in AAA activities

²² Americas Watch, *The Central-Americanization of Colombia? Human Rights and the Peace Process* (New York: Americas Watch, January 1986), 17.

²³ Americas Watch, *The Central-Americanization of Colombia*, 17.

²⁴ William Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy, and Civil-Military Relations in Colombia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 108, 120.

²⁵ In 1994 several founding members of “MAS” would establish the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (ACCU). In 1997 the leaders of the ACCU would establish the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), a national paramilitary movement which claimed to have thousands of men at arms. For in-depth reading on the origins of the AUC, see Castaño, Carlos, *Mi Confesión: Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos*, Interview by Mauricio Aranguren Molina (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 2001).

described their participation in the torture and killing of several members of left-wing opposition parties, and the bombing of three Bogotá-based periodicals (including *Alternativa*, edited by novelist Gabriel García Márquez and sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, and the newspaper *Voz Proletaria*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Colombia). The AAA, whose name was derived from the name of an Argentinean death squad that existed in the mid 1970s, folded after one year of operations.²⁶

As national and international human rights groups shed light on abuses committed by the Colombian military, paramilitary groups took on a greater role in counterinsurgency. In the late 1970s and early 1980s most of the violence in the Magdalena Medio region was rural-based, centred in the municipalities of Puerto Boyacá, Puerto Berrío and Cimitarra, followed by El Carmen and San Vicente de Chucurí.²⁷ The fact that actions were being carried out by clandestine forces, in relatively isolated rural areas, made what was going on doubly difficult to expose. According to statistics gathered from press and NGO reports by a Bogotá-based researcher on behalf of the Jesuit-run Centre for Popular Education and Research (CINEP), between 1980 and 1985 the *municipios* of Cimitarra and Puerto Boyacá accounted for 450 assassinations.²⁸ Human rights complaints against the Colombian armed forces decreased dramatically in the southern Magdalena Medio, in direct proportion to the increase in paramilitary groups' strength.²⁹ The case of Puerto Boyacá is striking. In the 1980-1985 period, the municipio of Puerto Boyacá reported 215 political murders. As social movement

²⁶ Gerardo L. Munk, *Authoritarianism and Democratization: Soldiers and Workers in Argentina, 1976-1983* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 53.

²⁷ Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*, 120.

²⁸ Romero, *Magdalena Medio*, 108.

²⁹ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 245.

organizations were silenced and paramilitaries took over, there was simply nobody left to denounce human rights violations.³⁰ As union leader and CREDHOS co-founder Rafael Gómez recalls, this was true right across the region: “If you look at *municipios* like La Dorada, Puerto Berrío, the rates of violence decrease at the moment that the *autodefensas* take control. It decreases because people submit to the *autodefensas*”.³¹

Early efforts to organize around human rights in Barranca itself were modest and short-lived. A small group of Barranca activists began working on human rights issues in 1980 in response to events in the region. They wrote a detailed report documenting cases of torture, forced disappearances and illegal detentions in the Magdalena Medio, and submitted it to Amnesty International.³² In 1982 a group called the *Comité de Derechos Humanos* was formally established in Barranca. But the committee never amounted to more than a small collective of concerned individuals, and it did not carry out any public activities. Then in 1983 the *Pastoral Social* organized a small human rights gathering in Barranca in a lecture hall at the *Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia*, Barranca’s main public university at the time. The speakers at the city’s first *Foro pro-Derechos Humanos* were local activists, including future CREDHOS’ president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, union organizer Fernando Acuña, and Jesuit priest Mario Calderón. The *Comité de Derechos Humanos* ceased to exist in 1983.

In spite of the growing interest in human rights being expressed by activists at the national and international levels, concerns around social services, infrastructure and

³⁰ There were no reported homicides or other human rights violations in Puerto Boyacá, Cimitarra and Puerto Berrío in the late 1980s. Puerto Boyacá now competes with Puerto Berrío for the title “counterinsurgency capital of Colombia”, as declared on billboards at the entrances to both towns.

³¹ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

³² Amnesty International’s second visit to Colombia was carried out in 1981.

labour continued to drive the agenda of Barranca's civic-popular movement.

Barranqueños were coming to consciousness about the magnitude of the counterinsurgency repression being carried out in the countryside. Yet the violence seemed somewhat distant, formless or intangible. That is, until *campesinos* began arriving in the city in far greater numbers, and exerting themselves more forcefully.

Escalating Violence in the Southern Magdalena Medio

The first right-wing paramilitary groups to appear in Colombia following the outbreak of guerrilla violence in the mid 1960s were based in the southern Magdalena Medio. The very first group, *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS) was conceived by drug kingpin Pablo Escobar in Medellín in December 1981 in response to a series of kidnappings for ransom of drug traffickers' family members carried out by M-19 guerrillas. "MAS" established a presence in the Magdalena Medio in 1982 at the invitation of army captain Óscar Echandía, then acting mayor of the *municipio* of Puerto Boyacá.³³ Within a year there were a dozen or more paramilitary groups operating in the southern Magdalena Medio, centred in the *municipios* of Puerto Boyacá, Puerto Berrío and Cimitarra. These groups, which would become the model for the spread of paramilitary networks across the country, specifically targeted areas under the influence of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). While these groups were funded by drug traffickers, their main purpose was counterinsurgency. In their bid to eliminate the guerrillas from the region, they mainly targeted civilians.

The link between politics and organized violence in the Magdalena Medio had a

³³ Kirk, *More Terrible than Death*, 106, 108.

long history. The Liberal and Conservative parties had both mobilized *campesinos* during *La Violencia*. The main port towns along the Magdalena River were a traditional stronghold of the left, dating back to the early twentieth century. Stevedores and oil workers had been organized under the banners of some of the country's most militant unions. As we have seen, through the 1940s this rugged frontier became a significant area of support for *gaitanismo*.³⁴ Political, trade union and popular movements in Puerto Berrío, aligned with the Liberal and Communist parties, had also suffered a long history of state-sponsored repression. During *La Violencia*, Conservative Party militias wiped out six per cent of the population of Puerto Berrío in an attempt to quell dissent.³⁵ Liberal Party guerrillas then established themselves in the area in an effort to deter Conservative attacks. The FARC began organizing militia in the southern Magdalena Medio in the mid-1960s, soon after the group's creation in 1965. At the time there was a direct link between the guerrillas and the then-banned Communist Party of Colombia (PCC). By the end of the 1960s the FARC were a well-established presence in the area, carrying out self-defense functions in areas of Communist influence, just as Liberal Party fighters had done in the past.

Increasingly, the FARC came into conflict with affluent landowners in the southern Magdalena Medio. The FARC and Communist Party (PCC) pursued contiguous growth in the region through the 1970s and early 1980s, in keeping with a tradition of combining "all forms of struggle".³⁶ The PCC secured influential minorities in the elected municipal councils of Puerto Berrío, Puerto Boyacá and Cimitarra. In the

³⁴ Arredondo, "Liberalism, Working Class Formation and Historical Memory".

³⁵ Roldan, *Blood and Fire*, 9.

³⁶ Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez, *Una democracia asediada: balance y perspectiva del conflicto armado en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2004), 94.

countryside, the FARC sought and received the cooperation of peasants and cattle ranchers alike. This strategy allowed the guerrillas to influence municipal politics, but was ultimately unsustainable. The FARC implemented a system of rents collection, the most lucrative of which were taxes charged to cattle ranchers. As the ambitions of the organization grew, so did its demands on local landowners. Some ranchers feared being kidnapped or worse, and a number left their properties to live with their families in Medellín and other cities. The emergence of what political scientist Carlos Medina Gallego has called the “economy of flight” put pressure on the overseers and middlemen who represented absentee investors’ interests in the region.³⁷ These relationships soured further as new investors flush with the spoils of the drug trade arrived in the region. These new elites were armed and in no mood to bargain with the guerrillas.

This period marks a significant shift in the overall strategy and approach of the FARC towards its revolutionary war. Shedding their identity as stationary “self-defense” forces, they pursued a more aggressive strategy of territorial and political control. The Seventh Conference of the FARC in May 1981 was a major turning point for the guerrilla organization: it was at this point that the FARC transformed itself into a mobile army determined to directly challenge the authority of the central state. It was at this point that the FARC added the initials EP – meaning *Ejército Popular*, or People’s Army – to its name.³⁸ The FARC-EP would now seek the military conquest of new territories and take the fight to the enemy. The FARC decided to reassign resources to areas where its presence would have maximum strategic impact. In the Magdalena Medio, the FARC

³⁷ Ibid., 146.

³⁸ Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army, *FARC-EP: Historical Outline* (Toronto: International Commission, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army, 2001), 26.

retreated from certain areas under paramilitary pressure, preferring to establish safe bases to the south-east and the west of Barranca. They opened a new front in the area bordering northeastern Antioquia and the far south of the department of Bolívar, where inaccessibility allowed them to operate in relative calm.

While the FARC planned to expand its areas of military influence in the region, activists in its traditional territories in the southern Magdalena Medio were under siege. The Communist Party (PCC) and other left movements, including trade unions, were especially hard hit by MAS in the *municipios* of Puerto Boyacá and Puerto Berrío. It was reported at the time that MAS agents committed 250 political murders in its first two years of operations.³⁹ As political scientists Michael Shifter and Jennifer Stillerman write: “The organization’s initial objective – to free the [Magdalena Medio] region of subversives – soon expanded to include attacks on any person or organization that resisted it”.⁴⁰ Military and paramilitary troops killed six town councillors and dozens of political activists in Puerto Berrío in 1982 and 1983. Communist town councillor Jaime Nevado was assassinated on July 22, 1982 by an army sergeant with the local Bomboná Infantry Battalion.⁴¹ Many PCC militants chose to abandon their work or flee the region altogether. The upshot was, in the words of a former commander of the FARC’s IX Front, a series of “strategic” errors committed as a result of the disarticulation of the

³⁹ Michael Shifter and Jennifer Stillerman, “U.S. Human Rights Policy Toward Colombia”, in Debra Liang-Fenton, ed., *Implementing U.S. Human Rights Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2004), 336.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 335

⁴¹ In 1983 the Batallón Bomboná was one of five battalions in the area re-organized for counterinsurgency purposes under the command of the Fourth Brigade of the Colombia army. The battalion was closely associated with the rise of paramilitarism in the region. See Proyecto Nunca Más, *Crimenes de lesa humanidad: zona 14a 1996* (Bogotá: Colombia Nunca Más, 2000), 383.

political and military sides of the revolutionary struggle in the region.⁴² The guerrillas' attempt to expand their sphere of influence had provoked a severe backlash, and the violent frontier was pushed toward Barranca.⁴³ As a result of this change, the Communist Party and the FARC were divided, and the social bases of the FARC diminished in the region. In April 1984 the Uribe Agreement was signed between the FARC's high command and the government of President Belisario Betancur, leading to the creation of the Patriotic Union party as the official political arm of the guerrillas and a further estrangement between the FARC and some members of the PCC.⁴⁴

From 1982 through the end of 1984, President Betancur's closed-door peace negotiations with the FARC and M-19 guerrillas proceeded with apparent success.⁴⁵ But any signs that the different parties might be approaching some kind of understanding belied continuing mistrust on all sides. The FARC went the furthest down the road towards an agreement with the government, renouncing kidnapping and establishing the Patriotic Union (UP) as a political wing in order to contest elections at the local and national levels. The Patriotic Union was a hybrid left-wing political movement comprised of made up of FARC sympathizers, members of the Communist Party and other left-wing activists hoping to find a political solution to the Colombian armed conflict. Members of the UP included activist oil workers, teachers, peasants and

⁴² Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*, 147.

⁴³ Carlos Miguel Ortiz, "Magdalena Medio", in Fernando Cubides, Ana Cecilia Olaya and Carlos Miguel Ortiz, eds., *La violencia y el municipio colombiano* (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios Sociales, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1998), 82-83.

⁴⁴ Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, 54.

⁴⁵ Pécaut, *Crónica de cuatro décadas*, 304. For detailed commentary on the legacy of Belisario Betancur, see collection of essays by former ministers and advisors who served during the Betancur administration. Diego Pizano, ed., *La penitencia del poder: lecciones de la administración del president Belisario Betancur, 1982-1986*, (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2009).

students. The FARC took advantage of the negotiations to expand their influence, both politically and militarily. The UP would suffer a terrible backlash at the hands of the Colombian military and paramilitary that would claim the lives of more than 500 members of the party in the 1980s, including many prominent local leaders in the Magdalena Medio.⁴⁶

In the midst of the negotiations, on November 6, 1985, the *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (M-19) guerrilla group stormed the Colombian Supreme Court building in the name of human rights. The guerrillas planned to hold Colombia's highest-ranking judicial officials hostage, and force them to stage a trial at which the Colombian government would be found guilty of breaching the ceasefire agreement signed with the M-19 in 1984, and the "betrayal of the publicly expressed will of the Colombian people".⁴⁷ The M-19's appeal to Colombian justice was met with overwhelming force. More than 100 people died in the counter-offensive launched by the Colombian army.⁴⁸ Amongst the dead were all of the rebels and 11 Supreme Court justices. Colombia's judicial system lay in literal ruins, and the future of human rights looked bleak indeed. The M-19 had dubbed the attack the "Antonio Nariño Operation for Human Rights", after a Colombian

⁴⁶ U.S. journalist Steven Dudley has authored the only book in English on the history of the Patriotic Union. Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (London: Routledge, 2004). See Leah Carroll, "Violent Democratization: the Effect of Political Reform on Rural Social Conflict in Colombia" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1989) and Leah Carroll, *Violent Democratization: Social Movements, Elites, and Politics in Colombia's Rural War Zones, 1984-2008* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Ana Carrigan, *The Palace of Justice: A Colombian Tragedy* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 284.

patriot imprisoned in the late eighteenth century for distributing copies of the French Revolutionary manifesto the Declaration of the Rights of Man.⁴⁹

The destruction of the *Palacio de Justicia* and the attacks on the Patriotic Union party marked the beginning of the end of revolutionary idealism amongst for many Colombians. By 1984, despite the peace negotiations in progress, the Colombian army had adopted an aggressive counterinsurgency strategy that combined military and socio-political forms of warfare, focussing on FARC-controlled areas.⁵⁰ Two specialized units of the Colombian army held sway over the Magdalena Medio region from their bases in Puerto Boyacá (No. 3 Infantry Battalion) and Puerto Berrío (Fourteenth Brigade). In 1984 the Colombian army sent one of its brightest stars, General Farouk Yanine Díaz, to lead the intelligence unit of the Fourteenth Brigade.⁵¹ General Yanine, a graduate and former instructor of the United States' School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, claimed that his mission was social as well as military: "Whoever wins over the civilian population will win the war with the FARC; if we win, we will have no need to fire a

⁴⁹ María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo, *My Life as a Colombian Revolutionary: Reflections of a Former Guerrillera* Trans. Lorena Terando (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005) 255.

⁵⁰ For an in-depth comparative study of the development of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), see Fernán E. González, Ingrid J. Bolívar and Teófilo Vázquez, *Violencia política en Colombia: de la nación fragmentada a la construcción del estado* (Bogotá: CINEP, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, 2003).

⁵¹ General Yanine Díaz was born in Gramalote, a small town in the mountains of the department of Norte de Santander, in 1937. He died in Bogotá of cancer on August 28, 2009 at age 72. At the time of his death, he was facing charges for having ordered paramilitary massacres in the Magdalena Medio in the late 1980s. Presidencia de la República, Secretaría de Prensa, "Presidente Uribe lamenta fallecimientos de Monseñor Gustavo Martínez y del general (r) Yanine Díaz" (August 29, 2009). <http://web.presidencia.gov.co/sp/2009/agosto/29/05292009.html>.

single shot in the future.”⁵² Yanine set out to exercise control over the 32 municipalities under his command, spread out along the Magdalena River and in highland Santander, through a combination of armed force and highly-visible social projects, such as road building and mobile health clinics.⁵³ This was, rhetorically at least, a reprise of the *desarrollista* approach that had been advocated by Brigadier General Álvaro Valencia Tovar for the Magdalena Medio in the 1960s. In January 1984 Yanine was promoted to lead the Second Division of the Colombian army in Bucaramanga, overseeing all counterinsurgency operations along the Magdalena River.

Beyond the collaboration that existed between military and paramilitary forces, there emerged networks of political, financial and social support for paramilitarism. During the 1980s, many peoples’ lives and livelihoods in the Magdalena Medio became circumscribed by paramilitary operations. Key nodes in these networks included elected officials, large landholders, and drug traffickers. The country’s most prominent drug traffickers, including Pablo Escobar and José Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha from the Medellín Cartel, contributed financially to the rise of paramilitarism in the Magdalena Medio. Rodríguez Gacha, in particular, invested heavily in cattle ranching in the area around Puerto Boyacá and provided large sums of money that would help strengthen the paramilitaries in the region.⁵⁴ For Rodríguez Gacha and Escobar, the Magdalena Medio was the site of money-laundering activities rather than drug production, and although their impact was significant, they did not provide political direction to the paramilitaries.

⁵² Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*, 165.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Álvaro Camacho Guizado, “De narcos, paracracias y mafias”, in Francisco Leal Buitrago, ed., *En la encrucijada: Colombia en el siglo XXI* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2006), 394-395.

It is no small irony that while Escobar was an important contributor to the group *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS) and an avowed anti-Communist who espoused left-populist and nationalist views that resembled guerrilla ideology.⁵⁵

Peasant Activists on the Frontline

Campesino organizations were the first to experience the direct impact of paramilitary violence, and the first to denounce it. According to figures collected by Colombia's leading social research institute, the Centre for Popular Education and Research (CINEP), about one third of peasant protest actions between 1980 and 1985 were motivated by concerns about human rights violations, paramilitarism and the escalation of armed conflict.⁵⁶ These were the first real wave of protests organized specifically in favour of human rights in Colombian history. The onset of paramilitary violence also marked the beginning of a general trend toward increased peasant militancy. The Magdalena Medio region was an epicentre of peasant protest during these years. Eight of the top 10 Colombian *municipios* with the greatest number of peasant protests organized between 1980 and 1995 were located in the Magdalena Medio.⁵⁷

Social movement leaders and elected officials from across the southern Magdalena Medio garnered the attention of both local paramilitaries and the central government. Two protests –*la Marcha del Silencio* (October 1982) and *la Marcha de la Solidaridad* (November 1982) – were organized in Puerto Berrío by local social and political movements, with the approval of the mayor's office and the Catholic Church.

⁵⁵ Dudley, *Walking Dead*, 142.

⁵⁶ Carlos Salgado and Esmeralda Prada, *Campesinado y protesta social en Colombia, 1980-1995* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP, 2000), 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

The most significant protest of the era was the *Marcha por la Vida y la Paz*, during which thousands of people from the region gathered in Barrancabermeja and proceeded overland more than 600 kilometres to the city of Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast.⁵⁸ The organizers of these protests were subsequently attacked by local army and paramilitary forces. On January 27, 1983 unknown assailants presumed to be working with MAS murdered Fernando Vélez Méndez, a Liberal town councillor and president of the human rights committee in Puerto Berrío, affiliated with the national *Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*.⁵⁹ Subsequently, both the mayor and a priest in Puerto Berrío had to leave town under threat of death. By the year's end, there was no human rights committee in Puerto Berrío, and the Communist Party had closed its office.

In the midst of negotiations with the FARC and M-19, President Betancur ordered the creation of a special commission of the Inspector General to look into the rise of paramilitarism in Colombia. Published on February 20, 1983, the Inspector General's report was surprisingly forthright. Notably, the report exposed links between the military and paramilitary groups: "The MAS is a genuine paramilitary movement... it is composed essentially of [state] officials who commit excesses when faced with the temptation to increase their capacity by making use of private forces".⁶⁰ The Inspector General claimed that more than one third of MAS paramilitary members under investigation were active Colombian military or national police personnel.⁶¹ However, the results of the commission were muted by differences between the Betancur government and military

⁵⁸ Proyecto Nunca Más, *Crímenes de lesa humanidad: zona 14*, 296.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁶⁰ As quoted in Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*, 189.

⁶¹ Shifter and Stillerman, "U.S. Human Rights Policy," 336.

authorities in the Magdalena Medio who sought a free hand in dealing with guerrillas. In December 1983 President Betancur sponsored a *Marcha por la Paz* or public rally for peace, in Puerto Berrío. He travelled to the region to demonstrate his commitment to human rights, accompanied by a large retinue of senior government officials, including the Ministers of Education, Justice and Government, the head of the Institute for Natural Resources and the National Peace Commissioner.⁶² This would be the last public demonstration in favour of human rights in the southern Magdalena Medio of any kind.

As progressive social movements declined in the southern Magdalena Medio, anti-Communist ranchers and politicians created a socio-political front. The effect was to both spread and legitimize the nascent paramilitary movement. In 1984 an association of cattle ranchers, the *Asociación Campesina de Agricultores y Ganaderos del Magdalena Medio* (ACDEGAM) was established under the leadership of Puerto Boyacá's Liberal mayor Luis Rubio. The ACDEGAM was a legally-registered business association that published reports on current events, hosted conferences, sent delegations to Bogotá to speak with President Betancur on issues of economic development and security, and organized marches in support of local military officials or to protest the presence of the FARC in the region.⁶³ They also set up rural schools and organized "medical brigades" to place healthcare workers into poor and isolated areas who could provide them with intelligence on left-wing activities.⁶⁴ In a very short period of time, they built a strong network of economic, political, social and military forces around an anti-Communist ideology. ACDEGAM was an important player in paramilitary organizing in the

⁶² Colombia Nunca Más, *Crímenes de lesa humanidad: zona 14*, 296.

⁶³ Jenny Pearce, *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1990), 247.

⁶⁴ Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, 68.

region.⁶⁵ The group's medical staff attended to sick and injured paramilitary fighters and spread the word about the dangers of Communism. The ACDEGAM office in Puerto Boyacá was used to stash weapons and organize recruitment. They even had a small commissary in town where paramilitaries could buy boots, combat fatigues and other basic equipment.⁶⁶

In 1979 at a meeting of the government-created National Agrarian Council, the National Association of Peasants (ANUC) had described the situation in the Magdalena Medio region as “agrarian militarization”. ANUC decried the mechanisms of control being imposed on the local economy by the Colombian armed forces, as well as an increase in arbitrary detention, torture and disappearances.⁶⁷ ANUC's interest in and articulation of human rights concerns was very closely bound to their disputes with the national government and local landlords over access to land and markets. Military roadblocks were set up at the entrances into the major town centres, the movement of people and goods controlled by means of army-issued and enforced travel passes and quotas. A pamphlet distributed by the army out of Puerto Boyacá read: “Peasant: collaborate with the Army, avoid restrictions, do not allow your land to lose its real value, and your children's future to be put at risk”.⁶⁸ The pamphlet outlined restrictions on the transport of food in the region, ostensibly as a means of preventing *campesinos* from

⁶⁵ ACDEGAM leaders were named by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights as being amongst the “intellectual authors” or planners of the 1987 forced disappearance of 19 tradesmen from the Bucaramanga area as they travelled through the Magdalena Medio en route to Medellín, in the department of Antioquia. ACDEGAM is also named as having helped plan the La Rochela massacre in 1989. See “Case of the Rochela Massacre v. Colombia Judgment”, Inter-American Court of Human Rights (May 11, 2007), 28.

⁶⁶ Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, 68.

⁶⁷ Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*, 152.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

supplying the “bandits”; that is the guerrillas (e.g. 1 kilo of beans was allowed per 15 people, 1 kilo of coffee per 100 people).

During this period, peasant organizers in the Magdalena Medio linked fears about security to the issues of land and economic justice. While ANUC literature from the era alluded to links between the regular Colombian army and the paramilitaries, few specific examples were offered, and the term “human rights” was rarely employed. On the occasion of the First Agricultural Forum for the Magdalena Medio – held in Barranca on July 23, 1983, with the participation of the Minister of Agriculture, the director of the National Peace Commission, the departmental governors of Santander and Antioquia, military officers and local political officials – ANUC leader Ángel Tolosa stated that violence and repression overrode all other concerns: “The old majestic Magdalena River... is now a peasant graveyard; not a day goes by in this port that we do not witness a parade of horribly mutilated and savagely tortured cadavers tossed aside by the death squads”.⁶⁹ ANUC called upon the government to guarantee the peasants of the region “respect for life and self-determination”.⁷⁰ In his speech to the assembled *campesinos* and government officials, Tolosa explained that peasants were being forced to abandon their parcels of land or sell them off “for the price of a scrawny chicken”.⁷¹ In April 1984 at a national meeting of ANUC’s *Sector Independiente*, the issue of security was highlighted yet again. This time “detentions, cases of torture, and all kinds of abuses that are committed against the peasants” were mentioned, in addition to concerns about the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – Magdalena Medio, “Posición de la ANUC Magdalena Medio Frente a los Problemas de Inseguridad, Tenencia de Tierra y Fomento Agropecuario” Primer Foro Agropecuario de la Zona del Magdalena Medio. (Barrancabermeja: July 23, 1983).

⁷¹ Ibid.

titling of land, as well as access to credit, technical and social services.⁷²

Access to land was a key concern for peasants during this period, due to encroachment by drug traffickers and highway construction. Farms abandoned by peasants in the areas around Cimitarra, Puerto Berrío and Yondó were claimed by absentee landowners, including cattle ranchers and drug traffickers. Other peasants were forced to sell their land at gunpoint. At a meeting of social movements in Bogotá in July 1984, ANUC linked the issues of land and violence:

Contrary to what politicians say... that the violence in the Magdalena Medio and other regions of the country is due to confrontation between the guerrillas and the army, that is to say a battle between “bad guys” and “good guys”, we maintain that the conflict is fundamentally socio-economic and political and essentially a dispute over the primary means of production: THE LAND.⁷³

As political scientist Nazih Richani describes, what was occurring in the Magdalena Medio was a dramatic process of forced concentration of landholding.⁷⁴ ANUC claimed that more than 51.7 per cent of private land in the Magdalena Medio was concentrated in the hands of just 4 per cent of landholders.⁷⁵ In the early 1980s construction began on major highways parallel to the Magdalena River on both its eastern and western shores, as well as southwest towards the Valle de Cauca. Highway construction displaced some peasant producers through expropriation, or as a result of the increased land leasing and purchase prices.⁷⁶

With paramilitary activity and peasant protest on the rise in the Magdalena

⁷² Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – Sector Independiente, “Conclusiones de la Junta Nacional Ampliada” (Barrancabermeja: 4 de abril de 1984).

⁷³ Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – Sector Independiente, “Origen de la Violencia y la Violencia en sí en el Magdalena Medio” I Simposio Internacional y II Seminario sobre Movimientos Sociales en Colombia (Bogotá: 24-30 de julio de 1984).

⁷⁴ Richani, *Systems of Violence*, 117-118.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Medio, social movement activists in Barranca began to sense that something was going horribly wrong. As CREDHOS co-founder and oil workers union leader Rafael Gómez recalls, bodies were literally thrown into the river, and displaced people from the countryside were showing up in the city:

In Barranca we started to become aware of the deaths of many people, from the river... toward the south. In Puerto Boyacá and all of that region, Puerto Boyacá, Puerto Berrío, El Carmen and San Vicente... the paramilitaries basically began their campaigns there. The dead floated down the river. Many displaced people who had suffered in those places... the paramilitaries took their land. That was, let's say, around 1983-1985, around that time, you could see that a lot of killings were being carried out in that region.⁷⁷

In the first half of the 1980s, Barranca registered a total of 99 political murders: high for a city of 100,000, but very low compared with what was to come.⁷⁸ The violence taking place outside of the city was a dark spectre, but not yet a concrete threat to *barranqueño* activists. Peasant groups, on the other hand, were starting to speak out clearly against the violence. By necessity, if not by vocation, peasants were the first human rights activists in the Magdalena Medio. In the city, in the meanwhile, urban activists still did not quite understand the seriousness of the threat they would soon face. And so for the time being, the civic-popular movement continued to organize around social issues.

Civic Coalition: *La Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* (CPB)

Barrancabermeja's most significant and most enduring social movement coalition, the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*, was established in 1983. The *Coordinadora* was a broad-based organization built on a long tradition of joint action by local movements. The founders of the *Coordinadora Popular* sought to enhance the

⁷⁷ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

⁷⁸ Romero, *Magdalena Medio*, 108.

capacities of Barranca-based organizations to work together on a permanent basis in demanding basic social, civil and economic rights from local and national levels of government. The purpose of the *Coordinadora Popular* was to meet regularly to ensure that there would be follow-up on issues of concern to local social movements between *paros cívicos*. The *Coordinadora Popular* wrote letters and press releases, spoke with local political authorities, and directed *paros cívicos* when deemed necessary.

Several social movement coalitions had in fact functioned in Barranca through the 1970s on a provisional basis, most notably the *Alianza Obrero Campesino Popular y Estudiantil*. Rapid urbanization and the drive for public services, such as potable water, proper roads, schools and sanitation, had led civil society groups to seek a participatory model of protest that could engage local residents who were not necessarily affiliated with a particular movement or union. In 1980, Barranca-based groups formed the *Coordinadora de Solidaridad*. Led by the USO and FEDEPETROL, the *Coordinadora de Solidaridad* was a way for unionized oil workers to build bridges between themselves and other popular social movements. According to the *Coordinadora de Solidaridad*'s founding statement, equal emphasis would be placed on addressing social problems, poverty, political violence, and the curtailing of civil rights under the National Security Statute.⁷⁹ However, this new formation did not succeed in mobilizing activists from the *Pastoral Social* or the *juntas de acción comunal*, which were the pillars of community-based politics at the time, the former tied to the Catholic Church and the latter tied to traditional political parties.⁸⁰ And its focus on political violence did not lead to any

⁷⁹ Equipo de Trabajo Popular, "El movimiento popular en Barrancabermeja," 87.

⁸⁰ The *Juntas de Acción Comunal* were created in 1958 by the first National Front President, Alberto Lleras Camargo, to administer small development projects in poor

ongoing human rights work. The first attempt to organize local neighbourhood groups in coalition in Barranca was the *Coordinadora del Sector Nor-oriental*, established in 1981 in the city's northeastern *barrios* under the leadership of the *Pastoral Social*.⁸¹

The *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* was conceived in 1982 during the planning of a *paro cívico* for improved public services. But the *Coordinadora Popular* was intended to have functions beyond the temporary mandate of a simple *comité de paro*, and its membership was far broader than the union-led *Coordinadora de Solidaridad* or the very local *Coordinadora del Sector Nor-oriental*. As Barranca civic leaders wrote in a report on *Coordinadora Popular* activities:

The organizers and participants were essentially the same during the civil strikes of 1975 and 1977 and with the *Coordinadora de Solidaridad*, but the nature and structure were different. It was conceived as a broad-based coordinating effort, in which neighbourhood committees and representatives played important roles, political parties were represented and *campesinos* and popular organizations took active part.⁸²

The *Coordinadora Popular* was comprised of and financed by Barranca's main social movement sectors, including local chapters of the oil workers' union, the local independent chapter of the national peasant union, and the Catholic Church, as well as

rural areas and urban *barrios*. Intended as a clientelist network to serve the interests of the state, many JACs became bases of independent social organization. See Rodrigo Villar, *El tercer sector en Colombia* (Bogotá: Confederación Colombiana de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales, 2001), 13. As political scientist Jenny Pearce writes: "In the wake of La Violencia, the National Front government attempted to construct its own communication channels with the people. One of the first laws of the 1958 government was to create Juntas de Acción Comunal (Community Action Committees)." See Pearce, *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth*, 148.

⁸¹ The *Coordinadora del Sector Nor-oriental* lasted just one year. After some initial success in lobbying the municipal government for improved bus service and road repairs, they participated in a national *Paro Cívico* in 1981 that failed to make an impact in Barranca. Discouraged by the lack of results, and concerned about attracting unwanted repression, the *Coordinadora del Sector Nor-oriental* was dissolved in 1982. Castilla, "Participación popular y movimiento social," 102-103.

⁸² Equipo de Trabajo Popular, "El movimiento popular en Barrancabermeja," 87.

juntas de acción comunal elected neighbourhood councils. By inviting political parties to participate openly and directly, the *Coordinadora Popular* also tried to avoid being divided by hidden political agendas.

Individual citizens could become involved in the *Coordinadora Popular* through its various “commissions” responsible for finances, communications, health, and civilian “*guardias*” which ensured public safety and discipline concerns during protests. The “*guardias cívicas*” established by the *Coordinadora Popular* had permanent functions at the neighbourhood level as well. According to a study authored by a group of Barranca activists, including teachers’ union organizer and human rights activist Luisa Serrano:

With the job of maintaining control and neighbourhood order... the *guardia* named a *Comandante de Guardia Cívica* who was a member of the Neighbourhood Committee. One of the tasks of the *guardía* was to prevent attacks against property within the neighbourhood... It also provided protection to demonstrators when the security forces were present by designating someone to speak to the military.⁸³

That the *guardias* were responsible for neighbourhood-level security, including dialogue with the police and military, demonstrated the importance of the neighbourhood-level activist. Unlike the coalitions organized in the past, the *Coordinadora Popular* attempted to make a direct link between the city’s burgeoning population and the leadership of the local popular movement. It was governed by a Board of Directors and a Central Committee, which included representatives of the various neighbourhood groups. But major decisions about the organization of *paros cívicos* were taken at open-air public assemblies, usually held at the *Parque Infantil*, located in Barranca’s main commercial district in front of the municipal cathedral.

The 1983 *paro cívico* was organized by the *Coordinadora Popular*, and led by the

⁸³ Londoño, et al., “Estudio económico-social de Barrancabermeja”.

USO and the *Pastoral Social*. Held on April 13, the *paro cívico* was a protest against the quality of the water supply in Barranca. The Ciénaga San Silvestre, the large swamp area from which Barranca's water was drawn, was contaminated by chemically tainted runoff out of a nearby Ecopetrol production zone. The *paro* was approved at a general assembly of the *Coordinadora* held in the *Parque Infantil* on April 7, 1983, attended by an estimated 5,000 people.⁸⁴ While the protest was mainly about water, the 35 organizations represented by the *Coordinadora Popular* presented the national government with a long list of demands related to various deficient aspects of local development. They demanded that utility rates be lowered for low income households and that the Ciénaga San Silvestre be decontaminated at the expense of Barranca's two main industrial polluters, the state-run oil company Ecopetrol and *Fertilizantes de Colombia*. Further demands were made to improve bus service to the north and southeastern *barrios*; to improve the quality of care provided by Barranca's sole public health facility, Hospital San Rafael; to ensure that an adequate number of teachers were employed in the local school system; to undertake a number of road repairs; to resolve simmering labour disputes at Ecopetrol, the hospital, and the sanitation works company; to dredge the Magdalena River in order to remove accumulated silt around the area of the city's main port area; and to resolve seven different land disputes involving organized peasant groups in the rural Magdalena Medio.⁸⁵

On the eve of the *paro cívico*, the departmental trade union federation, the *Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Santander*, declared its solidarity with the strikers, calling on

⁸⁴ "Aprueban paro en Barrancabermeja," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 8, 1983.

⁸⁵ "Hoy definen fecha del paro cívico," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 7, 1983.

transport workers to respect the protest. The same day, Colombia's largest palm oil plantation and processing centre, located in San Alberto, Cesar, in the northeastern corner of the Magdalena Medio, was shut down by workers striking for better wages and improved health and other social services.⁸⁶ The USO announced that it would hold a national strike in solidarity with Barranca, involving all of its affiliates. Guerrilla groups in the region issued communiqués expressing support for the *paro cívico*.

Local Liberal and Conservative party representatives spoke out against the protest, and the governor of Santander called for calm. The commander of the Fifth Brigade of the army in Bucaramanga said that his troops would provide security during the course of the *paro* in case subversives attempted to infiltrate or take advantage of the event. By taking responsibility for the organization of the protest, the *Coordinadora* was able to discuss concerns about public safety directly with security forces and partially mitigate the tendency of the national police and army to use force. On the evening of April 12, 1983 local markets and shops were overwhelmed as people stocked up for what they feared could be a serious breakdown of public order. Taxi drivers increased their fares as midnight approached.⁸⁷ In response to concerns about public security, the organizers of the *paro* announced that *guardias cívicas* would patrol the streets. Though the *paro cívico* was meant to last just a single day, many feared that violence would occur, prolonging the shut-down of Barranca for days.

The *paro* commenced five hours earlier than planned. By 7:00 p.m. on April 13, the first barricades went up. Protestors shut down all of the main entrances to the city,

⁸⁶ "Usitrás apoya paro cívico en Barrancabermeja," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 12, 1983.

⁸⁷ "Hoy, paro cívico," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 12, 1983.

and cut off train and river transport. Passengers arriving on a flight from Medellín had to walk in 38 degree heat nine kilometres from the airport into town. Protestors burned tires at the barricades, and threw tacks onto the city's main streets to discourage cars from passing. The *Coordinadora* mobilized dozens of small *barrio*-level committees to ensure the fullest participation possible. A crowd of about 5,000 demonstrators convened in front of the offices of the water services company in the morning. But no acts of violence were reported. Men, women and children gathered at the barricades, chanting and raising their hands in victory. The day ended as planned, with a general assembly in the *Parque Infantil*. And the army kept its distance.

On April 23, 1983 the municipal government of Barranca announced that it would make substantial new investments to repair and expand the city's aqueduct and telephone networks. But no specific commitments were signed. The 61st anniversary of the founding of the municipality of Barranca was celebrated on April 26, at which the governor of Santander announced that a "high level" government commission would soon visit Barranca to seek solutions to the city's chronic problems.⁸⁸

Just as life was returning to some semblance of normalcy for many in Barranca, the urgency of the socio-economic crisis deepened. On April 30, 1983 more than 300 squatters were forcibly evicted from a privately held plot of land at the foot of the bridge connecting the main part of the city to the northeastern *barrios* of Las Malvinas and Primero de Mayo.⁸⁹ Days later another *paro cívico* was organized by the *Coordinadora*

⁸⁸ "Vendrá comisión de alto nivel para estudiar los problemas," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 27, 1983.

⁸⁹ "Desalojadas 64 familias," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), April 30, 1983.

Popular, timed to coincide with the annual May Day celebrations.⁹⁰ While May Day celebrations were traditionally convened by the city's labour unions, this time the motivation for the protest came straight out of the southeastern *barrios* of the city. The residents of the neighbourhoods of María Eugenia, el Cerro, Santa Barbara and others had been without water for a gruelling 12 days. The hundreds of people who heeded the call to set up barricades at the As de Copas and other strategic points around the city treated the *paro* as an opportunity to hold a street party, singing, dancing and relieving the tension built up over the water issue. Within 24 hours, trucks were dispatched to distribute water to the southeastern *barrios*, and the *paro* ended.⁹¹

However, tensions remained high in and around Barranca. Parts of the city were without water for an additional four days. On May 2, residents of the southeastern *barrios* blockaded the road connecting Barranca to Bucaramanga by dumping stones and logs onto the highway.⁹² Interim Mayor José Domingo Villa responded on behalf of the local administration, enforcing a curfew and suspension of liquor sales between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. The mayor's decree also allowed persons suspected of subversive activity to be held by police for up to five days without charges. Villa stated: "In light of behaviour that has upset public order and the freedom of movement... it has been decided to impose severe security measures".⁹³ The police urged parents to keep their children at home as teachers went on strike for two days, and additional riot police were dispatched from Bucaramanga to patrol the streets. The teachers were joined by hundreds of student

⁹⁰ Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero*, 25.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹² "Toque de queda en Barranca," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 3, 1983.

⁹³ "Ley seca y toque de queda en Barranca," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), May 3, 1983.

supporters and parents demanding increased funding to meet the growing demand in the city. Students from Diego Hernández Gallego high school, known for its well organized and radical student groups, protested in front of the city's private schools until they too declared classes cancelled.⁹⁴

On May 12, 1983 the *Coordinadora Popular* announced a full and detailed platform of demands directed at local and national levels of government, revolving around unfulfilled promises, social rights and public services. Water, health, education, roads, good government, and land titles for new urban settlers were all highlighted. The *Coordinadora Popular* organized an outdoor assembly in the *Parque Infantil* on May 18, attended by thousands, at which plans for yet another *paro cívico* were approved.⁹⁵ The next day a group of four people representing the *Coordinadora Popular*, including well-known Communist Party organizer Leonardo Posada and Father Eduardo Díaz, travelled to Bucaramanga to meet with governor Rafael Moreno Peñaranda and Liberal congressman and former Barranca mayor Horacio Serpa Uribe. The commander of the Nueva Granada Battalion in Barranca, José Manuel Bonnet, said that the *paro cívico* was being promoted by “political interests”, and the *barranqueños* were pawns in a game designed to destabilize the city's legitimate public institutions.⁹⁶

On May 24 an ad hoc committee comprised of various civic leaders – elected

⁹⁴ The first student strike in the history of Barranca was organized at the Colegio Diego Hernández de Gallegos in 1957. The strike would establish in Barranca a tradition of high school student radicalism that would encourage and replenish the ranks of the city's broader civic-popular movement. Rafael Antonio Velásquez, “Primera huelga estudiantil en Barrancabermeja, Junio de 1957” unpublished document (2006).

⁹⁵ “Aprobado paro cívico,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 19, 1983.

⁹⁶ José Manuel Bonnet would be promoted to General following his stint in Barranca and would eventually serve as top commander of Colombia's armed forces. “Expectativa por la situación en Barranca,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 15, 1983.

officials, union representatives and members of the city's entrepreneurial class – travelled to Bogotá to meet with President Belisario Betancur. They presented him with a petition calling for significant national government investments in water, sewage, garbage collection, health care, education, roads and bridges, and job training.⁹⁷ Led by Mayor Jaime Barba Rincón, the committee argued that the recent rapid growth of the city continued to outstrip the municipality's capacities. Nearly 40 per cent of the city's budget was being spent on infrastructural needs, including road building and repair and potable water, seriously diminishing the quality of most other basic services. The committee warned that the social crisis in Barranca was "promoting movements against the lawfully constituted civic authorities".⁹⁸ The *Coordinadora Popular* requested a separate meeting between the President and representatives of Barranca's civic-popular movement, but it was never granted. The governor of Santander travelled to Bogotá to meet with President Betancur several days afterward, requesting national government intervention to address the city's needs and the "delicate" security situation.⁹⁹

The main historical grievances that had inspired *paro cívicos* in Barrancabermeja in the 1970s remained unresolved. Relations between the civic-popular movement and the national government had not improved, in spite of the fact that the city's civic popular movement had been received by the President of Colombia. Conflict was increased by the failure of such high-level talks and of the numerous promises that the basic social service issues affecting the city would be resolved. It is into a context of tremendous

⁹⁷ "Comité cívico dialogará con Belisario Betancur," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 25, 1983.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ "Dice el Gobernador: El acueducto de Barranca, preocupación prioritaria," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 28, 1983.

social movement fervour, somewhat disconnected from what was taking place in the Magdalena Medio, that the next waves of displaced peasants arrived.

The Vuelta Acuña Massacre

The first episode of rural-based violence to directly impact the activist community in Barranca, including several future members of the Regional Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS), was the massacre of eight people by paramilitary forces in the rural farming settlement of Vuelta Acuña in the *municipio* of Cimitarra in the department of Santander on January 12, 1984. As *Pastoral Social* community organizer Juan de Díos Castilla writes:

The monotony was all of a sudden interrupted with the *tomas campesinas* that became frequent from that point on, whose objective was to make demands on the state, for respect of *campesino* activities, against violations of human rights, and for the demilitarization of the Magdalena Medio.¹⁰⁰

News of the massacre arrived in Barranca via newspaper and radio reports. A short article appeared in the January 14 edition of the *Vanguardia Liberal* where the eight dead were described as guerrillas killed in combat.¹⁰¹ Army spokespeople even provided the media with details of how the incident had unfolded.

It is during this period that strategically-located communities near Barranca began to feel the pressures of counterinsurgency actions carried out by the Colombian military and paramilitary groups. There was increasing anxiety among the Colombian elite and high-ranking members of the military concerning political negotiations between the

¹⁰⁰ Castilla, "Participación popular y movimiento social," 105.

¹⁰¹ "Abatidos ocho guerrilleros," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), January 14, 1984.

FARC and the government of President Belisario Betancourt.¹⁰² The FARC and the government had agreed to a ceasefire, but this did not prevent either side from pursuing military goals. Located approximately 40 kilometres south of Barranca, Vuelta Acuña is a rural fishing and peasant farming community. The name “Vuelta Acuña” refers to a narrow tributary that curves around a large island located just north of a hairpin bend in the Magdalena River. The *vereda* of Vuelta Acuña is traversed by the Barranca-Medellín railway line and a major highway. Given its strategic location, and the historic presence of the FARC in the area, reports of an army-guerrilla firefight seemed credible at first. But the official story would soon be refuted.

Vuelta Acuña remains a paradigmatic case study of a type of paramilitary violence that originated in the Magdalena Medio, characterized by direct military involvement in the planning and carrying out of selective assassinations, massacres and forced internal displacement. The massacre at Vuelta Acuña prompted an exodus of *campesinos* to Barranca that obliged urban activists to confront what was occurring. The perspective of many Barranca activists would change with the influx of *campesinos* from war-torn areas. As we have already seen, in the early 1980s the Magdalena Medio was the centre of a counterinsurgency campaign designed to wrest strategically important areas from the hands of the FARC. Vuelta Acuña typified the way in which civilians came to be affected by paramilitary forces that sought not merely to punish guerrilla supporters, but to seize control of territory through terror.

During the two weeks following the Vuelta Acuña massacre, more than 1,000 people fled the area and headed for Barranca, where they briefly occupied the city’s

¹⁰² Forest Hylton, *Evil Hour in Colombia* (New York: Verso, 2006), 70.

municipal courthouse, before setting up camps in and around a high school. It was a way of calling attention to their cause. They demanded that the army stop carrying out massacres and killings in the rural Magdalena Medio. In a communiqué *campesino* leaders invoked the “right to life”, stating “we are Colombians and human beings too”.¹⁰³ The massacre at Vuelta Acuña might have gone unnoticed if it had not been for the pressure exerted by the *éxodo campesino*, or peasant exodus. Long-time PCC militant and former Barranca city councillor David Ravelo remembers that the influx of displaced families from Vuelta Acuña had a huge impact on Barranca: “The peasant marches began to generate links to workers’ organizations in Barrancabermeja, the people of Barrancabermeja, oil workers, it was relationship of solidarity with the peasants. Here in Barranca we began to forge a very important and powerful movement”.¹⁰⁴ The arrival of such a large group of *campesinos* in Barranca prompted a state of emergency in the city, due to concerns about public security in the face of paramilitary violence, as well as health, since the presence of so many *campesinos* cooking and sleeping in the outdoors, without water and adequate food began to take its toll. Reports that conditions in the squatters’ camp were unhygienic and that children were suffering from diarrhea drove home the urgency of the peasants’ demands.¹⁰⁵

The central government in Bogotá acted quickly to set up a commission of enquiry, comprised of local officials as well as several high-ranking central government functionaries, including the Attorney General and the High Commissioner for Peace. For

¹⁰³ “500 campesinos se tomaron el Palacio de Justicia,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), January 30, 1984.

¹⁰⁴ David Ravelo (president of CREDHOS), interview with author, Barrancabermeja (March 10, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ “Campesinos abandonaron el Palacio de Justicia,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), January 31, 1984.

several individuals who participated in the commission, this was their first experience of human rights work. CREDHOS co-founder Jael Quiroga recalls:

All of the people that left Vuelta Acuña... I remember I went with Nel Beltrán.¹⁰⁶ Nel Beltrán was a regular priest, he invited me to go there to Vuelta Acuña, and I met with such desperate people, who no longer believed in the Church, Nel Beltrán started to say Mass... and they were so untrusting. Vuelta Acuña was sadness, because at that time the people who stayed behind in Vuelta Acuña in the rural areas had to live with the paramilitaries, many families came to Barranca and left children behind there, and other children they brought with them... the trauma that mothers in Barranca have suffered, it is just terrible.¹⁰⁷

The circumstances of the massacre of Vuelta Acuña were far too complex for the commission to unravel on their short visit. Some families had left members behind to take care of crops and animals, while others were divided by politics. Stories about exactly how the killings had been carried out varied. Nevertheless, a commitment was made to investigate what had occurred and to lay charges.

Unconvinced that it would be safe to return home, the majority of the displaced ended up staying in Barranca, settling into the hardscrabble northeastern *barrio* of El Progreso.¹⁰⁸ In her novel *En el brazo del río*, Marbel Sandoval Ordóñez captures the fear, confusion and incredulity experienced by two teenage girls from Vuelta Acuña.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Parish priest Nel Beltrán would become director of the office of the Pastoral Social in Barranca in 1987 and the Bishop of Sincelejo, Córdoba in 2000. In 2005 he was appointed to the committee overseeing negotiations between the government of Conservative President Álvaro Uribe Vélez and the paramilitary *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC).

¹⁰⁷ Interview with author (Bogotá: September 27, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the killings continued in Vuelta Acuña into the next year, as the XIV Brigade consolidated its hegemony over the municipality of Cimitarra, eliminating the Communist Party (PCC) and Patriotic Union (UP) presence. In total, more than 35 people were killed or disappeared in paramilitary operations in Cimitarra in 1984.

¹⁰⁹ Marbel Sandoval Ordóñez is a Bogotá-based journalist and novelist who spent time in Barrancabermeja in the 1990s working for the *Vanguardia Liberal* daily newspaper.

Sierva María, a 13-year old who settles in Barranca with her family following the massacre, questions whether government-led investigations can serve any purpose:

I thought about the news that I read about the Special Commission charged with finding out what happened in Vuelta Acuña... but that was justice after the fact, the kind that gets applied after things have happened... Did people have to die to be taken care of? What would be the truth? My truth was that I was not yet fourteen years old and a day. All at once my eyes were opened, only I did not like the light that I saw.¹¹⁰

Killings continued in Vuelta Acuña over the next few months, as the XIV Brigade consolidated its control over the *municipio* of Cimitarra. In total, more than 35 people were killed or disappeared in paramilitary operations in Cimitarra in 1984. In 1985 charges were laid against 35 soldiers accused of massacring *campesinos* in the area of Vuelta Acuña. The charges related to several different incidents, including the events of January 1984. But all of the charges were eventually dropped.

The presence of displaced people from war-torn rural areas like Vuelta Acuña fundamentally changed the political geography of the city. The new arrivals alerted the rest of Barranca to the war being waged in the surrounding countryside, and as CREDHOS co-founder Jael Quiroga's recollections suggest, they were marked by the stigma of subversion. Displaced *campesinos* in Barranca's southeastern and northeastern *barrios* became targets of a new urban variant of the paramilitary violence they had fled. *Campesino* leader Ángel Tolosa, himself a migrant to Barranca from rural Antioqueño, was the target of an attempted assassination inside the ANUC office in Barranca on February 25, 1985. The first bullet struck him, and the second missed. Had Tolosa been killed, it would have been the highest profile assassination of a Barranca-based activist to

¹¹⁰ Marbel Sandoval Ordóñez, *En el brazo del río* (Bogotá: Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2006), 121.

that point. In response, ANUC members organized a march through the streets of the city. They were joined by trade union members, and together they occupied the local headquarters of the Internal Affairs Agency of the national government, which at the time was the highest judicial authority responsible for human rights and public security.

Conclusions: A New Political Geography

The massacre at Vuelta Acuña was interpreted by many in Barranca as a warning that the counterinsurgency war being waged in the southern Magdalena Medio was drawing nearer to the city. The decision taken by peasants in the area to flee to Barranca ensured that the seriousness of the paramilitary threat would be acknowledged by urban activists who worked with poor urban squatters and peasant groups. Through the mid-1980s the human rights issues raised by displaced peasants would resonate with an increasingly broad circle of groups and individuals in Barranca, leading ultimately to the advent of a regional human rights movement centred in the city.

This period of transformation was a direct prelude to human rights organizing in Barranca. Chased from their homes, people from the rural areas and small towns of the Magdalena Medio articulated their concerns in terms of human rights. Rural migrants established dozens of new neighbourhoods, and breathed life into ongoing struggles for potable water, land titles, housing and education. Imagining Barranca's civic struggles within a broader historical vision of where Colombia was headed, local social movements forged or renewed linkages to rural groups, including the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos*, the *Coordinadora Campesina del Magdalena Medio*, and rural *Juntas de Acción Communal*, or elected community action councils. Working with

displaced persons from violence-stricken areas now carrying on their struggles in the context of Barranca created bonds that changed the city's identity and its civic-popular movement.

Chapter 5

Public Protest and Human Rights Activism

We have had very tough times in Barranca and in the whole country, and the feeling of unity seems farther and farther away... but we have also been capable of coming together as a people [*como pueblo*] during tough times, of being strong in the face of this, building movements that we can identify with and support.

Yolanda Becerra, President of the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP)¹

Introduction

Most Latin American human rights movements in the late twentieth century were born in response to state and state-sponsored terrorism directed against social activists. As leading Peruvian human rights activist and sociologist Carlos Basombrío Iglesias writes: “Latin American human rights movements have emerged almost exclusively as responses to abuses by the state”.² The ascendancy of human rights activism in Barrancabermeja during the 1980s is closely linked to the onset of a state-sponsored dirty war against popular movements, in a region with strong presence of national government and military authorities. However, human rights movements cannot be viewed as simple axiomatic responses to political violence and repression. The advent of human rights in Barrancabermeja must be understood with respect to a long history of social movement struggle around civil and political rights. For 23 out of 25 years between 1958 and 1990, Colombia was governed under the terms of extraordinary legal measures that concentrated power in the hands of the executive and gave the military free reign to

¹ Yolanda Becerra (president *Organización Femenina Popular*, OFP), interview with author, Barrancabermeja (March 10, 2006).

² Wasserstrom, et al., 156.

suppress popular protest when it was interpreted as allied with or supportive of left-wing subversion of official institutions.³

The Regional Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS) was established at a time when paramilitary and military repression threatened to reverse hard-fought gains made by local activists. In the mid 1980s a record number of Colombians took to the streets to claim a wide range of rights.⁴ In 1987 alone there were 49 *paros cívicos* in Colombia, more than double the yearly average over the previous decade.⁵ The year CREDHOS was founded, 1987, was the most violent in Colombia's history since the end of *La Violencia*.⁶ Many of the city's most important social and labour groups were attacked during this period, and human rights emerged as the language of popular protest. CREDHOS is exceptional in the history of human rights organizing in Latin America because it was established by frontline activists in an area of armed conflict. Under extreme circumstances, CREDHOS brought a coalition of social and political movements together for the purposes of exposing human rights violators, advocating on behalf of victims and their families, and calling on the state to protect its citizens, while addressing the deeper social and economic inequalities.

The decision by a diverse coalition of Barranca-based unions and social movements to join a human rights committee in 1987 can be seen both as a refutation of paramilitary violence and an attempt to maintain the space for Barranca's long-standing social movements to carry out their work. The people who set up CREDHOS in 1987

³ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 241.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶ Homicide rates in Colombia had been steadily rising since the mid 1970s. The most dramatic increases, however, occurred between 1984 and 1987. There were 9,969 homicides in 1984, 12,922 in 1985, 15,735 in 1986 and 17,447 in 1987. *Ibid.*, 237.

sought not merely to curb abuses, but to address basic questions of social justice and defy the authority of the Colombian state. Régulo Madero – a long-time CREDHOS activist and former elected departmental representative of the Patriotic Union (UP) party for Antioquia – says that in the 1980s many activists saw a direct link between their work, local popular social movements and a larger struggle to transform Colombian society:

Many people saw it up close, they touched it. They lived it. I think we got ahead of the facts. Many of the social movements and human rights movements in this country, not just in Barrancabermeja, sympathized with this, and so in large part one of the goals of the social movement was to overthrow the state, albeit with words instead of guns.⁷

Human rights activism was a new means of mobilizing ordinary citizens and challenging political and economic power in Barranca. Protests in favour of human rights became commonplace in Barranca, Bogotá, and numerous other Colombian cities. Gradually through this period human rights became the language of radical social change in Colombia. *Campesinos* and labour activists invoked human rights to protest attacks on their membership and to advance claims that the central state was undemocratic and illegitimate.

This chapter aims to better understand the onset of the dirty war and the inception of human rights activism in the mid 1980s from the perspective of Barranca-based social and political activists. I explore the ascendancy of human rights organizing and protest at the precise moment this shift occurred. By utilizing the language of human rights, CREDHOS rendered the political violence being committed by state and para-state agents in Barranca apparent and legible to ordinary citizens within and beyond the region

⁷ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

of Magdalena Medio.⁸ They formally denounced the violence and worked within the judicial system to support victims. But perhaps their greatest immediate impact was in rallying Barranca's social movements around the cause of human rights. This chapter begins with the stories of the 1985 murder of former guerrilla commander and local folk hero Ricardo Lara Parada, and the 1987 murder of teenager Sandra Rondón Pinto, which provoked the 1987 *paro cívico por la vida* and the establishment of CREDHOS.

The Murder of Ricardo Lara Parada: Who Fired the First Shot in the Dirty War?

The 1980s was a period of rapidly escalating paramilitary and guerrilla violence, and competition between different guerrilla factions for influence in Barranca. There have been many politically-motivated homicides in Barranca's short history, but few as significant or as confounding as the murder of *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) co-founder Ricardo Lara Parada. Lara Parada's complex personal journey parallels the recent history of Barranca. His assassination on November 14, 1985 in Barranca by members of the ELN marked the start of a dirty war between the state, paramilitary forces, and Marxist guerrillas. It also revealed ideological contradictions and cleavages within and between the country's main Marxist guerrilla groups that would trouble the city's social movements for more than a generation.

The story of Lara Parada's rise to prominence, fall from grace, rebirth and untimely death is a parable, symbolizing Barranca activists' aspirations to build a pluralist civic-popular movement. To his friends, such as law professor Jairo Vargas León, Lara Parada was the personification of Barranca's exuberant activist culture:

⁸ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 26.

[Lara Parada] was profoundly humanist, he expressed solidarity with the people, he was joyful like no one else I know, of a singular charisma, at times naive, unaware and without fear, an advocate for diversity, an interpreter of the heterogeneity in our society, convinced that it was important to put a person's humanity above political ideology, anonymous poet, frustrated accordionist and life of the party [*rumbero*]. The many melodies he created are still resonating in the hearts of *barranqueños*. Ricardo Lara: *el sonero mayor*.⁹

By contrast, to ELN leaders at the time, Lara Parada was a deserter, a coward, and an opportunist. Many activists recall the murder of Lara Parada as the first shot fired in the dirty war that would consume the city in the late 1980s. One long-time community activist and Barranca resident would recall: "After the assassination of Ricardo Lara Parada, it was as if they had opened the floodgates to kill and kill".¹⁰

The ELN had purged its ranks of "traitors and *sapos*" before, most brazenly in the early 1970s under the leadership of Fabio Vásquez.¹¹ But the murder of Lara Parada was the first attack against a popular public figure in Barranca. Lara Parada was a native son of Barrancabermeja who had forsaken civilian life to pursue the cause of revolution. Born in 1940 the son of an oil worker and trade union activist, Lara Parada left his hometown in 1960 to study at the *Universidad Industrial de Santander* (UIS) in Bucaramanga. While attending university, Lara Parada became a leader of the *Juventudes Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal*, a regional youth movement of the Liberal Party that drew inspiration from the experiences of the *Comuna de Barranca* uprising in 1948 and the guerrilla battles led by Rafael Rangel during *La Violencia* in the 1950s. At university Lara Parada met and worked alongside several co-founders of the

⁹ Jorge Eduardo Nuñez H., *Crónicas de lucha por el poder local* (Barrancabermeja: Alcaldía Municipal de Barrancabermeja, 1997), 28.

¹⁰ Arenas, *Cerrando fronteras*, 118.

¹¹ In Colombia the term "*sapo*" – literally "toad" – is used to refer to individuals who work as spies on behalf of the police or military. An English equivalent might be informer or snitch.

ELN. Lara Parada would play a key role in building the ELN guerrilla movement. He was trained in guerrilla warfare with five other student activists in Cuba in 1962, establishing the precursor to the ELN, the *Brigada Pro Liberación José Antonio Galán*, named after the popular nationalist leader of the eighteenth-century *Comuneros* revolt.¹²

Lara Parada's career as a military commander was problematic, and ended amidst accusations that he had betrayed the guerrillas' cause. In 1967 Lara Parada was named commander of the *Frente Camilo Torres Restrepo* and a member of the ELN's Central Command. In 1968 he was promoted to the rank of deputy national commander. However, Lara Parada would last just one year in that position, replaced by Fabio Vásquez Castaño. Like other young and idealistic students who joined the guerrillas in the 1960s, Lara Parada had no military experience. He was recognized for his political intelligence and communications skills, but this did not compensate for his lack of military acumen. ELN historian Milton Hernández assesses Lara Parada's tenure as a field commander and national leader:

Ricardo Lara Parada demonstrated a total lack of aptitude as a member of the ELN Central Command; his irresponsibility led to the annihilation of the Frente Camilo Torres Restrepo; which was one of the worst blows to the ELN in 1969. That annihilation provoked a profound personal crisis in Lara Parada, forcing Fabio Vásquez Castaño to relieve him of his command... In November 1973, at the time of the worst moment in our history, caused by the events of "*Operación Anorí*", that we were only beginning to understand, he deserted our ranks in what constituted a profound act of cowardice.¹³

Lara Parada was captured along with 18 other ELN guerrilla fighters on November 25,

¹² For a review of the historiography of colonial Colombia, including a discussion of important works on the *Comuneros* revolt and other late colonial social and popular political movements, see essays by Bernardo Tovar Zambrano and Fabio Zambrano Pantoja, in Bernardo Tovar Zambrano, ed., *La historia al final del milenio: ensayos de historiografía colombiana y latinoamericana* vol. 1 (Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Nacional, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, 1994).

¹³ Hernández, *Rojo y negro*, 31.

1973 in Nechí, Antioquia. The commanders of the army's Medellín-based IV Brigade were thrilled by Lara Parada's capture, convinced that he would reveal classified information about the ELN's growing network of urban militia and the whereabouts of the group's leader Fabio Vásquez.¹⁴ The ELN was reeling from their historic defeat at the hands of the Colombian army in 1973 during *Operación Anorí*. Leaders of the ELN speculated that Lara Parada had given himself up to authorities deliberately and then negotiated good treatment in exchange for information.

Lara Parada spent the next five years in La Picota prison in Bogotá, before being released and exiled to Central America. He first travelled to Panama, where he had made personal contact with left-leaning Panamanian President Omar Torrijos through a mutual friend, Nobel laureate and novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Torrijos helped Lara Parada by giving him a job as an organizer in an agricultural cooperative. One year later, Lara Parada moved to Nicaragua and went to work in a state-run gold mine on behalf of the newly-formed Sandinista revolutionary regime. In 1980 he was working as a bodyguard for the Sandinista Minister of the Interior when he received a visit from M-19 guerrilla leader Jaime Bateman, who asked him to return to Colombia. He secretly returned to Colombia in late 1981, this time to the southern department of Putumayo, to work for the M-19. In 1982 Lara Parada spent a year in Bogotá as a participant in the ill-fated peace process between the FARC, M-19 and the government of President Belisario Betancur.¹⁵ Lara Parada had joined the process in spite of his fears that the Betancur

¹⁴ Memorandum. United States Consulate-Medellín. Cable to United States Secretary of State (November 30, 1973). National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

¹⁵ For further reading on the negotiation process, see Mark Chernick, "Negotiating Peace amid Multiple Forms of Violence: The Protracted Search for a Settlement to the Armed Conflicts in Colombia," in Cynthia J. Aronson, ed., *Comparative Peace Processes in*

government was untrustworthy. For their part, the ELN denounced the negotiations and refused to participate. Negotiations soured, violence in the countryside escalated, and the M-19 remained at arms. Lara Parada, however, was granted an amnesty for having played a role in the M-19 negotiations.

Lara Parada's homecoming at a time of great turbulence in Barranca confirmed his status as a local hero. Visiting Barranca from Bogotá in May 1983, Lara Parada was asked by friends to give an impromptu address to an assembly of the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*. It was his first public appearance in the city. Encouraged by the warm reception he received from old friends and activists, and encouraged by the stories he had heard about the recent *paro cívico*, Lara decided to stay. He planned to open a bookstore that he hoped would become a hub for radical intellectuals, activists and students. He joined the small but growing campaign to establish a public university in Barranca, which would have ensured greater access to higher education for local residents who did not have the means to attend the *Universidad Industrial de Santander* in Bucaramanga. Many people – old friends, neighbours, activists from the city's many movements – passed through the Lara household in the first weeks. Within the first month he had abandoned his idea of settling into a life of debate, poetry and *tertulias*, and decided to get involved in local politics.

Lara Parada launched his activist career in Barranca by establishing a new regional political party with strong ties to local social movements called the *Frente Amplio del Magdalena Medio* (FAM). The *Frente Amplio del Magdalena Medio* achieved a great deal in a short period of time. Not only did it elect city councillors, but

Latin America (Stanford, Washington DC: Stanford University Press, Woodrow Wilson Press, 1999), 159-196.

it also led public protests, participated in the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* coalition work, and articulated a regional vision of political, social and cultural development. The FAM message touched on all of the major issues being raised by the *Coordinadora Popular* and *campesino* groups. In their campaign literature, the FAM stated: “We simply take up the struggle developed by the people during *paros cívicos* and by *campesinos* from the region in defense of the land and the right to life”.¹⁶ The FAM also supported regional and national peace processes, and the “dissolution of paramilitary groups” by the state, which would become a major tenet of human rights organizing in the years to come.¹⁷ In March 1984 the FAM ran a slate of candidates in Barranca’s municipal elections. In spite of the fears of many FAM supporters that they would be stigmatized as “subversive” because of Lara Parada’s involvement, and the well-funded campaign of the Liberal Party, the FAM made a breakthrough. Two FAM candidates were elected to municipal council. For the first time since the 1940s, the Liberal Party in Barranca was reduced minority status on the municipal council.

In September of 1983, at a national gathering commemorating the tenth anniversary of the defeat at Anorí, ELN guerrilla commanders named a squad of assassins to travel to Barranca and execute Lara Parada. But the plan was not carried out for two more years. Lara Parada was gunned down on the streets of Barranca in November of 1985.¹⁸ The alleged betrayal he had committed in 1973 had evidently not faded from memory. His rise to prominence as a spokesperson for the M-19 guerrillas and his newfound ambitions as a political leader proved too much to ignore.

¹⁶ Frente Amplio del Magdalena Medio, “En el F.A.M. no inventamos una plataforma de lucha!!!” *Alternativa de cambio*, Pamphlet, 1984.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica*, 56.

The ELN has said that while the decision to assassinate Lara Parada was justified, the timing was ill-advised. The ELN has denied that the decision to kill Lara Parada was intended as an attack on the FAM or as a message to the city's social movements. They have insisted that they were simply carrying out an execution order against Lara Parada that had first been issued by the guerrilla commanders in 1974. As activist priest Padre Eduardo Díaz observed in a 1990 interview: "I think that the death of Lara Parada was one of the gravest political errors... in Barranca there has always been political confrontation, but the death of Lara Parada broke the barriers down, opened the floodgates."¹⁹ By the time the assassination was carried out, Lara Parada's FAM was a well established force in local politics, and many *barranqueños*, including some ELN supporters, were behind him. In its own words, the ELN "...acted without considering the political context at the time, appeared disconnected from the conjuncture and caused a strong polemic at the national level".²⁰

The killing of Lara Parada drove a wedge between factions of the left in Barranca and opened the door to the encroachment by armed groups of civilian organizing spaces. Those sympathetic to the ELN may have been at pains to comprehend the rationale behind the killing. Those sympathetic to the FARC rallied behind Lara Parada's memory, and within two years the orphaned FAM entered into an official alliance with the political wing of the FARC, the Patriotic Union.²¹ According to Irene Villamizar, a

¹⁹ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 258

²⁰ Hernández, *Rojo y negro*, 247.

²¹ In 2008 one-time FARC *miliciano* and confessed paramilitary assassin Mario Jaimes Mejía, alias "*el panadero*" publicly admitted his involvement in two of the most brutal and significant paramilitary massacres in Barranca history, which took place on May 16, 1998 and February 28, 1999. In his statements, which were filmed and simulcast to an audience in Barranca, "*el panadero*" said that he had been recruited to the FARC by then-

founding member of CREDHOS and long-time activist with the *Pastoral Social*, the murder of Lara by his former comrades was a direct precursor to an increase in guerrilla actions that ran counter to Barranca's tradition of pluralist civil protest:

When the guerrillas began to take control of the *paros cívicos*, many leaders were afraid. If [the guerrillas] had behaved differently, in a more civilized way, the history of Barrancabermeja would have been very different from what it is now. I am totally convinced that the death of Ricardo Lara Parada changed everything. The ELN killed Lara Parada, and that intolerance, that thinking that the armed struggle was going to lead to liberation... the guerrillas just were not capable of seeing the very important role that Ricardo Lara was playing. This changed the struggle in Barranca. Because until that time, everyone, ELN [*elenos*], FARC [*faruchos*], right wing, left wing, whatever... we could listen to one another and tolerate one another. But the death of Lara Parada brought out the differences between us. In spite of all of this, and I think again that the Church plays a big role, we were able to join together, organize ourselves and defend our lives. But we lost leadership.²²

Villamizar suggests that the battle for Barranca might have played out differently had the guerrillas not attempted to co-opt social movement initiatives.

The ELN and the FARC moved to consolidate their influence in Barranca during this period. The guerrillas benefited from the political space opened up by social movements. The *paros cívicos*, strikes and election campaigns organized by progressive groups in Barranca echoed the kinds of concerns being articulated by the guerrillas. One Bogotá-based social activist who worked in support of the ELN in Barranca during the 1980s, believes that the guerrillas were trying to do the right thing by supporting popular movements. She notes, however, that Colombia's guerrilla groups displayed partisan tendencies that compromised their relationships with social activists:

This was the 1970s and 1980s, the period of revolutionary fervour in Latin America. I mean, even the Catholic Church... there were all sorts of reasons for

FAM leader Luis Zárate, alias "Lucho Bigotes". Estefanía González Vélez and Orián Jiménez Meneses, *Las guerras del Magdalena Medio* (Bogotá: Intermedio, 2008), 237.

²² Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

this fervour...in the sense that change was absolutely necessary in terms of improving peoples' lives and that revolutionary struggle involving arms was a legitimate thing to do. In terms of my own experience, it was very much about the discourse that it was a peoples' revolution, it was not about 10,000 guys in arms taking power. It was about building a base of support for revolutionary change, and without that base of support, it would never happen. That was the discourse... I think the questions were being raised internally, and there certainly were codes of conduct and rules and regulations about fair war and those kinds of things, but there wasn't a questioning yet about the validity of the revolutionary struggle. So some questions were not being asked: it did not make sense to ask them at that point.²³

The guerrillas were a presence in everyday life in Barranca. In the wake of the disaster that was *Operación Anorí* and the departure of commander Fabio Vásquez Castaño in the early 1970s, the ELN tried to recast itself as a popular movement. The ELN effectively abandoned the *foquista* approach of revolution, which maintains that the guerrillas should constitute a political vanguard for others to follow and join, in favour of a process of rapprochement with broader movements.²⁴

The murder of Lara Parada demonstrated that there were limits to the guerrilla's tolerance of political pluralism. They were, after all, fighting a war, and the idea of combining civil and military action was ultimately irreconcilable. As one former guerrilla sympathizer describes: "The guerrillas really wanted popular support. But it was a contradiction that was impossible to overcome, because clandestinity is a very difficult thing to manage when you are talking about a mass movement. I mean, they just

²³ Anonymous interview with author (Bogotá, October 28, 2006).

²⁴ The establishment in March 1985 of the group ¡A Luchar! as a national political movement with links to the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) was emblematic of this shift. For further information, see Marta Harnecker, *Entrevista con la nueva izquierda. Entrevista a Bernardo Jaramillo, de la Unión Patriótica, y Nelson Berríos, de A Luchar, sobre los desafíos que enfrentan los cuadros públicos en un país en que existe una guerra de guerrillas* (Managua, México, Lima, Centro de Documentación y Ediciones Latinoamericanas, 1989).

don't go together".²⁵ From the ELN's point of view, Lara Parada had committed an unpardonable offense. To many *barranqueño* activists still working for social change today, Lara Parada's murder marked the opening of an especially dark chapter in the city's history and the realization of their own vulnerability. *Campesinos* were not the only ones being targeted, and all sides were capable of violence. Paramilitary attacks increased in proportion to the expansion of left-wing insurgent groups, and human rights became a key concern for all progressive movements.

The Advent of Human Rights Activism

The birth of the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS) can be linked to a sequence of murders committed by the military and paramilitary that brought clarity to Barranca's social movements on the issue of political violence. While the murder of Lara Parada by the guerrillas was troubling and divisive from the point of view of local social movements and left-wing political activists, the assassination of high profile activists by counterinsurgency forces was unifying.

Leonardo Posada Pedraza was murdered on August 30, 1986 by unknown assassins. Leonardo Posada was a major figure in the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC) and a member of the Colombian House of Representatives on behalf of the Patriotic Union (UP).²⁶ One human rights activist describes how Posada's death was connected to the establishment of CREDHOS:

²⁵ Anonymous interview with author (Bogotá, October 28, 2006).

²⁶ Leonardo Posada was one of nine members of the Colombian House of Representatives and five senators elected on behalf of the UP in 1986, just one year after the founding of the party.

Previously, deaths occurred all over the Magdalena Medio, but not in town. Barranca was a city that took in *campesinos* displaced by the violence, but then death appeared on the street corners of the city, everywhere... The violence convinced us to look for a way of fighting for human rights. In 1986 we started to build the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, CREDHOS, and in 1987 we consolidated it.²⁷

Leonardo Posada was one of the brightest stars of the Colombian left. While studying sociology at the National University in Bogotá, Posada served as the national president of the Communist Youth (JUCO), before being promoted to the Central Committee of the PCC. He moved to Barranca in 1980 to work with the city's popular movements and to organize on behalf of the Communist Party. He was a founding member of the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* in 1983.

Like many of Barranca's martyred popular leaders, Posada is remembered not only for his leadership qualities, but also for his love of life. Years after his death, a close friend remembered him with a few lines of poetry: "Leonardo, *el viejo man, salsero, bolerista*, man of a thousand and one *tertulias*, he was a man who came into your life unexpectedly, those of us who loved him, and those who hardly knew him."²⁸ Posada was regarded in activist circles as a gifted organizer, charismatic speaker, and *rumbero*. Posada found a home in Barranca's vibrant activist community, where challenging authority and conformity were highly valued. In the end, neither Leonardo's status as a congressional representative, nor his involvement in important national political processes such as negotiations with the Colombian state and the M-19, were enough to protect him. Posada was gunned down in Barranca at approximately 6:00 p.m. on August 30, 1986 by assassins riding a motorcycle. In his last interview with a local journalist,

²⁷ Arenas, *Cerrando fronteras*, 119.

²⁸ Anonymous, "Leonardo Posada, historia de vida", unpublished (December 10, 1998).

Posada “I want them to sing *boleros* at my grave”.²⁹ A *paro cívico* was organized by members of the Communist Party and UP in Barranca, and an estimated 10,000 people attended Posada’s funeral in his hometown of Bogotá.³⁰

The situation augured particularly poorly for the Patriotic Union in the Magdalena Medio. Scores of UP militants had been killed all over Colombia in the first year of the party’s existence. According to FARC leader and congressman Braulio Herrera, as many as 300 members of the UP were killed in that short period of time.³¹ On the evening of April 23, 1987, three prominent Barranca-based members of the UP and five other people were injured by the explosion of a hand grenade thrown into the busy Monte Blanco ice cream shop located in the central Barranca neighbourhood of La Campana.³² Patriotic Union members César Martínez, Miguel Castañeda, and Alirio Traslaviña were the intended targets. At the time, most people in the city were gathered at home or in cafés and bars watching Colombia defeat Brazil to claim the South American junior soccer championship. The Monte Blanco was nonetheless full of families, including many children, a number of whom were injured by shrapnel.

This latest attack against the UP would also be met with a *paro cívico*, led by local UP and PCC party members, but with broad participation. The national government’s formal denunciation of the attack against the UP did little to ease tensions in the city. Within six hours of the Monte Blanco attack, barricades of burning tires were

²⁹ “Primer aniversario de Leonardo Posada: un mártir con los ojos abiertos,” *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), September 1987. In his book on the Patriotic Union, U.S. journalist Steven Dudley writes that as he lay dying, Posada asked that no hymns be played at his funeral, only *boleros*. Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Ley seca por disturbios en Barrancabermeja,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), April, 24 1987.

set up at the *As de Copas*, at the entrance to the city centre. Communist Party activist

David Ravelo remembers that day vividly:

I was at home, not far from the San Rafael Hospital... it was about 7:30 or 8:00 p.m. We met just outside the hospital and said that we had to do something, because this just cannot go on any longer... at about 10:00 p.m. we all got together at a strategic spot known as the *As de Copas*, on the way out of Barrancabermeja. We blocked the road, more people came, the police came... a couple of guys with guns showed up, we figured it was the security forces, threatening, and the people just jumped on them, burned their motorcycle. Because the people were furious. At 10:00 a.m. the mayor of Barranca, a Liberal mayor, called [UP municipal councillor] Ismael Jaimes, and myself, and we went down to City Hall. And while we were talking to the mayor, the police descended on the barricades, and the people were dispersed. They used tear gas, fired shots into the air. And by the time we got back we found that the police had overturned the pots [of *sancocho*], and the protestors were radicalized. We had only occupied the one spot, the *As de Copas*. After that though, the thing spread to the entire city. The entire city was paralyzed, all because of the aggression against the protestors who had been at the barricades.³³

Ordinary citizens who joined the barricades seized the moment to demand a solution to Barranca's persistent contaminated water problem, as well as an end to political repression and other human rights abuses. In the aftermath, Patriotic Union and other municipal councillors sat down with the mayor and regional military authorities to negotiate the release of 30 protestors who had been detained by police.³⁴ The *paro* ended within 24 hours, and a tense calm came over the city.

From that day forward, social protest in Barranca became increasingly spontaneous and polarized. The very next week, traditional May Day celebrations turned into another *paro cívico*, with union-led protestors setting up barricades and blocking the

³³ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 10, 2006).

³⁴ At the time, the UP was an influential, albeit not dominant, political force in Barranca and throughout the region. The mayors of the largely rural municipalities of El Carmen and Sabana de Torres (Santander), Yondó (Antioquia), and San Pablo (Bolívar) were all members of the UP, as were three Barranca city councillors. "Los alcaldes de la UP en el Magdalena Medio," *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), April 1987.

flow of goods and transportation to protest a wide variety of issues. The indignation felt by many activists in the wake of the Monte Blanco attack was very much alive. In an effort to quiet May Day protests, Mayor Rafael Antonio Fernández declared a curfew, as well as a temporary prohibition on alcohol sales and on the bearing of arms.³⁵ The army and police mobilized to keep people off the streets from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. May Day protestors in Barranca were labelled “extremists” by the national press.³⁶ A major event in the calendar of the local labour movement, May Day typically involved a march through the streets of the city and a rally held in front of the national headquarters of the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO). Celebrations – including stirring speeches, live music, beer and *sancocho*– were well-attended by union members and other activists. May Day festivities in Barranca were a platform for expressing a variety of concerns and grievances, as had been the case following the April 1983 *paro cívico*. The spontaneity and diversity of the 1987 May Day reflected this tendency.

The protest organized to denounce the killing of Leonardo Posada was well attended by Barranca residents. Posada was a well-known leader who worked on behalf of a left-wing political party. Posada’s murder did not seem to indicate that ordinary citizens were being targeted as well. By comparison, the attack on UP members at the Monte Blanco ice cream shop was foreboding. It was carried out in a public place frequented by children and families, and several bystanders were injured. While peasants had been killed simply because they lived in areas of guerrilla influence, similar dynamics had not yet been present in the city.

³⁵ “Ley seca por disturbios en Barrancabermeja,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), April, 24 1987.

³⁶ “Ley seca y toque de queda en Barrancabermeja,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), May 3, 1987.

Mourning and Popular Protest in the Aftermath of Violence

A transformation was evident in the politics of protest in Barranca in response to increased political violence. The rituals of the *paro cívico* were becoming less regimented and more spontaneous. Whereas in the past *paros cívicos* were often carefully planned events, preceded by weeks of negotiations between social movements and the national government, and requiring extensive planning on the part of activist groups, in the late 1980s there was a tendency for human rights protests to be convened without preparation, in response to specific events. Historian Alejo Vargas observes:

There was a transformation in terms of the demands, the mechanisms of organization, which started to become quite spontaneous, and also in terms of objectives... it was no longer about winning tangible demands but rather to express protest and disagreement in the midst of a social environment that was starting to become chaotic.³⁷

While there had always been a level of confrontation with authorities, the radicalization of the *paro* reflected a rising tide of frustration and an increasingly unstable mix of revolutionary politics evident in the city. As Vargas suggests, protestors' actions suggested a rejection of the state itself, particularly in light of paramilitary activity and consistently high levels of impunity for crimes being committed in the region.³⁸

³⁷ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 238.

³⁸ Many attempts have been made to calculate levels of impunity vis-à-vis the justice system in Colombia. For the purposes of this study, a useful formulation is to simply look at the total number of homicides and the number of convictions that result. This formulation cannot account for the quality of the convictions (i.e. the conviction of the “intellectual authors” versus the “material authors” of crimes). However, it does help to explain the frustration felt by victims of violence. In 1994, for instance, only 1 in 5 homicides resulted in the arrest of a suspect, or suspects. Of that total, there was a 4 per cent conviction rate, or 0.8 per cent of the total. Hernando Gómez Buendía, ed., *El conflicto, callejón con salida. Informe nacional de desarrollo para Colombia – 2003* (Bogotá: Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, September 2003), 167.

Twelve days after the initial attack against the Patriotic Union party (UP) and just one day after the May Day protests, a 14 year old girl named Sandra Rondón Pinto was gunned down in broad daylight on the streets of Barranca. Sandra had been identified by local media as a key witness in the case of the attack on the UP members. Sandra was on her way to church on the morning of May 2, 1987 when two men drove up to her on a motorcycle and opened fire at close range. Struck nine times, she died instantly.³⁹ The murder of Sandra Rondón shocked Barranca at a level that only the death of an innocent child can, and she immediately became a symbol of the devastating toll and ruthlessness of the dirty war. Neither Sandra nor her parents were active with the Patriotic Union or Communist Party. It was becoming clear to many people in Barranca that the assassins were prepared to silence individuals who might speak out against the violence, regardless of whether they were activists.

Sandra Rondón's murder prompted the first-ever *paro cívico por la vida*, a massive general strike during which thousands of *barranqueños* took to the streets to demand the right to life and freedom from terror. The *paro cívico por la vida* would last just two days, but would prove to be truly historic. The *paro* engaged a wide swath of *barranqueño* society, gained the support of national political leaders and editorialists, and brought the fears and tensions present in Barranca to the attention of the rest of Colombia. The *paro cívico por la vida* differed significantly from the demonstrations triggered by the death of Leonardo Posada and the attack at the Monte Blanco restaurant, in terms of its sheer scale and the sense of outrage expressed. On Tuesday May 5 Sandra Rondón Pinto was buried. Thousands of mourners gathered in the *Parque Infantil*, the

³⁹ "Asesinada menor que presencié atentado a miembros de la UP," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), May 5, 1987.

square located next to Barranca's modern cathedral that was often the site of popular assemblies. The crowd accompanied the cortège on foot as it made its way to the old municipal cemetery a few blocks to the east. Later that same evening, members of the *Coordinadora Popular* held an emergency meeting to plan a *paro cívico*. The *paro* was scheduled to get underway the following morning. However, several hours before the *comité del paro* could mobilize its members to blockade strategic points of entry into the city centre, small groups of young people had already proceeded to the usual meeting places, and set fire to tires and other debris.⁴⁰

The second day of the *paro cívico por la vida* was a day of contrasts and tension. In the Primero de Mayo neighbourhood, a major centre of activism since it was established by organized land invasion in 1975, protestors attacked symbols of power and outside interference in local affairs. They vandalized a police station and attempted to do the same to a Mormon church.⁴¹ That same afternoon, thousands participated in a silent vigil and march through the streets of the city, led by Father Gabriel Ojeda, parish priest for the neighbourhood of Torcoroma where Sandra Rondón's family attended church. At the end of a prayer for Sandra, Father Ojeda passed the microphone to representatives of the *comité del paro*, who urged those assembled to maintain discipline and abstain from acts of anger or violence. Defying the *comité del paro*, ELN members made an appearance on 28th Street, not far from the barricades at the *As de Copas*. They were armed and carried a banner bearing the name of the group. One eyewitness recalls people dispersing at first, perhaps because they could not be sure who the armed men were, or

⁴⁰ "Incidentes en paro de Barranca," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), May 7, 1987.

⁴¹ Alonso Heredia Durán, "Con nutrida manifestación terminó el paro cívico en Barrancabermeja," *El Espectador*, (Bogotá), May 8, 1987.

perhaps because they feared confrontation with the police.⁴² Soon afterwards, some of the people who had dispersed returned to the barricades and applauded the *muchachos* from the ELN. The first ever *paro por la vida* ended on the evening of May 7, a few hours after the conclusion of a large and emotional assembly in *Parque Camilo Torres*.⁴³

Barranca residents rose up in spontaneous protest and commemoration on numerous occasions during the late 1980s in response to politically-motivated killings carried out by military and paramilitary forces. Barranca had not witnessed impromptu mass demonstrations on such a scale since the uprising known as *la Comuna de Barranca* that took place following the murder of populist Liberal politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. In more recent years, social protest in Barranca tended to be built on consensus between the diverse social, labour and political groups that made up the city's civic-popular movement. This is not to suggest that there had not been pockets of turmoil within the *paros cívicos* for public services and infrastructure of 1975, 1977 and 1983. Rioting and other expressions of frustration were part of the dynamic in each case. But the spontaneity and frequency of the *paros cívicos* of the late 1980s set them apart. These events gave added impetus to social movement activists to organize collectively around human rights principles. At the same time, a new volatility was apparent that

⁴² Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero*, 32

⁴³ Inaugurated in 1983, the *Parque Camilo Torres Restrepo* commemorates the Jesuit priest and iconic member of the ELN who died in combat near Barranca in 1966. On several occasions in the early 1990s the statue of Camilo Torres was decapitated. Even today, the park is often referred to locally as “*El descabezado*”, or “the headless man”. In 2006 the metal plaque on the base of the statue was removed by vandals, leaving no evidence of the park's origins. Arenas, *Cerrando fronteras*, 77. For an interpretation of a similar desecration, see Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación (Colombia), “Amenazas y ataques a la memoria y sus símbolos,” *Trujillo, una tragedia que no cesa: Primer informe de Memoria Histórica de la Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2008), 211-213.

would erode the foundations of the civic-popular movement itself, and make way for Marxist guerrillas to increase their power and influence.

Debating Human Rights at the National Level

In January 1987 the Ministry of the Interior convened a group of some of the most renowned social scientists at Bogotá's National University to undertake a study on the social and political origins of the current violence in Colombia as a guide to government policy on peace and human rights. All of the assembled scholars had worked on the history and sociology of violence in Colombia, including the civil wars of the nineteenth century and *La Violencia* in the 1950s. Amongst the nine academics who took up the challenge, were anthropologist Jaime Arocha Rodríguez, sociologist Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez and project director Gonzalo Sánchez Gómez, as well as Major General (retired) Luis Alberto Andrade Anaya, the former Inspector General of the Colombian Armed Forces. They treated the question of violence as a broad social problem, tied in many ways to economic exclusion, underdevelopment and inequality. They stated that while all forms of violence were linked, at least 90 per cent of all violence in Colombia was the result of social and economic conflict, rather than the conflict between guerrillas and the military: "The violations that are killing us are street crimes, not those committed in the guerrilla conflict [*del monte*]"⁴⁴ They calculated that, in spite of the prominence

⁴⁴ Gonzalo Sánchez G., ed., *Colombia: violencia y democracia. Informe presentado al Ministerio de Gobierno* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia-Centro Editorial, Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia, 1987), 18.

of Colombia's guerrilla movements on the national political scene, their actions accounted for less than 7.5 per cent of all homicides.⁴⁵

Barranca received special mention in the report of the government-sponsored academic commission on violence. The authors noted that illegal paramilitary groups like those in Barranca, dedicated to "the elimination of citizens for their activism in political parties and the simple suspicion that they collaborate with armed groups" represented a greater future threat to the country than the army and guerrillas combined.⁴⁶ Barrancabermeja was described as being the main staging ground for politically-motivated killings in the country.⁴⁷ The report noted: "...the growing recourse to the privatization of justice is very worrying. It not only represents a private method of settling accounts... It also represents the privatization of the administration of the political and justice systems".⁴⁸ The state, they said, was allowing paramilitaries to illegally prosecute a war on suspected guerrillas and proponents of social and political change.

The Colombian government was forced to acknowledge that civilians were the main victims of violence in the country. In May of 1987 the Colombian Supreme Court announced the creation of a *Tribunal Especial de Instrucción*, a special non-partisan judicial commission charged with investigating human rights crimes. The murder of 14 year-old Sandra Rondón Pinto in Barranca was the main catalyst behind the initiative. However, expectations and pressures on the *Tribunal Especial* were heavy, and nobody would accept to serve on it. Three of the country's top jurists turned down the offer. One

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Sánchez, *Colombia: violencia y democracia*, 68.

⁴⁷ Along with Villavicencio (Meta) and Bucaramanga (Santander).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

excused himself for personal reasons, and another said he believed that the *Tribunal Especial* would interfere with ongoing peace negotiations. Eduardo Umaña Luna – the esteemed defender of political prisoners and one of the most prominent figures in Colombia’s human rights movement – also declined the position.⁴⁹ Some observers suggested that the whole enterprise was dangerous and naive. Others pointed out that because the *Tribunal* was not mandated to investigate alleged crimes committed by the Colombian security forces, its ability to combat impunity was very weak indeed. The impact of this failure was to reinforce the belief held by many social activists that the Colombian state was loath to address the deepening spiral of violence.

In the late 1980s Colombian popular movements and progressive scholars embraced human rights as foundational to social, economic and political change. In September 1987 Colombia’s largest trade union federation, the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT), called a one hour strike against the dirty war.⁵⁰ Then, in December 1987, a human rights forum was convened in Bogotá by faculty from the city’s three top universities. Modest in size, the forum represented an influential gathering of researchers, journalists and social activists, as well as the government’s top human rights official, the Inspector General (*Procurador General*). A joint declaration was published, which read as follows:

Now more than ever the crisis in the country has gone beyond the diagnoses and the proposals of those Colombians who work toward democracy. It is no longer about finding an adequate distribution of economic and cultural goods, or of providing access without exclusion to political representation, but rather, above all else, to safeguard the most basic human rights. Life is threatened. Those of us who hold the ideal that difference should not be persecuted are being treated as

⁴⁹ “Nadie se salva,” *Semana* (Bogotá), May 12, 1987.

⁵⁰ Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica*, 179.

enemies to be exterminated.⁵¹

In his address, political scientist Francisco Leal Buitrago said that “political violence in Colombia has reached intolerable limits”, taking care to mention both guerrillas and paramilitaries as perpetrators of terror.⁵² It was, in the estimation of the academic community, time to address political violence as such. The solutions proposed by participants in the forum included staging citizens’ protests, human rights education, concerted government action to end impunity and stem violence, the dismantling of paramilitary groups, and the promotion of civic values.

The Colombian state has adopted international human rights standards into national law and has developed one of the largest human rights bureaucracies in the world. The number of judges, lawyers and other public officials dedicated to human rights is impressive, yet most crimes go unreported, or are never investigated due to threats against judicial personnel, the imposition of “state of siege” legislation, and the increase in paramilitarism.⁵³ The Colombian government recognized the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 1985, allowing international legal intervention in Colombia’s domestic affairs, something that neither Canada nor the United States has done.⁵⁴ One year later, President Belisario Betancur created the Permanent Commission for the Defence of Human Rights, a mixed government-NGO initiative led by the Attorney General and representatives from Colombia’s best known

⁵¹ Francisco Leal Buitrago, “Los derechos humanos en la actual situación colombiana,” *Análisis Político* 2 (September-December 1987): 61-62.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵³ Elvira María Restrepo. *Colombian Criminal Justice in Crisis: Fear and Distrust* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 169-170.

⁵⁴ Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 47.

human rights groups.⁵⁵ The Presidential Advisor on Human Rights was established in 1987 as an interface between the office of the President and human rights groups. The United Nations working groups on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance and Extrajudicial Killings undertook their first visits to Colombia in 1988 and 1989, respectively. By 1991, with the approval of a new Constitution, the offices of the Human Rights Ombudsman and Attorney General were created. And yet just as these advances came into being, violence in Colombia reached new heights and spread to almost every corner of the national territory.

Human Rights and Revolution in Late 1980s Barranca

In Colombia in the 1980s, academics, trade unions, *campesino* movements and the Catholic Church had distinct ways of framing human rights. Social movements in the Magdalena Medio were linking human rights concerns to longstanding political and social struggles. Different registers of human rights discourse were used by Colombian social movements, as well as by the government, rebel groups, and even the Colombian military.⁵⁶ These differences were often a source of tension. Just as political violence was the impetus for human rights organizing, the sustained pressure suffered by social movements in the Magdalena Medio had the effect of increasing competition between different social and political actors.

⁵⁵ These included the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (est. 1973), the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (est. 1979), the “José Alvear Restrepo” Lawyers Collective (est. 1980), and the Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared (est. 1982). Attorney General Carlos Mauro Hoyos would be killed in Medellín on January 25, 1988 by gunmen assumed to be acting on behalf of “los extraditables”, narcotraffickers upset with the policy of extraditing accused drug dealers to the United States. He was replaced by former Barranca mayor Horacio Serpa.

⁵⁶ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 256.

Through the middle of the 1980s, peasant movements in the Magdalena Medio led by example, utilizing the language of human rights to express the urgency of their demands. *Campesinos* continued to be hit hard by violence, displacement and military controls on transport. In response, they made demands on the national government that their basic rights to life and freedom of movement be respected. In 1986 *campesino* groups from Santander, Bolívar and Antioquia threatened to mobilize thousands of families in protest unless their human rights were protected against military and paramilitary threats.⁵⁷ The mayor of Yondó, Antioquia, sent a report to the national government in August 1986 that the Colombian armed forces had carried out aerial bombings in northeastern Antioquia in guerrilla-controlled areas. Dozens of *campesinos* had already abandoned their farms and homes and set up camps in the main plaza in Yondó, just across the Magdalena River from Barranca.⁵⁸ Protestors complained that the national government had failed to meet the terms of agreements signed one year earlier, following a *marcha campesina* that saw thousands of peasants occupy the streets of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast.

The first major test of the consensus for human rights amongst activists in Barranca occurred when the agenda of the *campesino* movement collided directly with the agenda of the civic-popular movement. In early June of 1987, just three short weeks following the *paro cívico por la vida* in commemoration of Sandra Rondón Pinto, Barranca would become the focal point of a large regional *campesino* strike. *Campesinos* from the departments of Cesar, Bolívar, Santander, Norte de Santander and Arauca

⁵⁷ “En toda la región: se gesta un gran paro campesino,” *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), August 1986.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

marched on major regional cities on June 8. The *paro del nororiente*, which shut down the rural economy across five departments, was denounced as “subversive” by some national politicians.⁵⁹ Activist and trade unionist Jairo Chaparro recalls:

Here in Barranca the *paro del nororiente* was different than other *paros*. It did not have the same support and the Bishop said that the movement had a hidden agenda. Business owners were pissed off [*andaban cabreros*]. Ecopetrol and other companies in the city paid for small planes to drop pamphlets denouncing the protest... In the lead-up to the protest there was a brutal psychological war, brother [*viejo man*]. Raids, people taken out of their homes and the like. It was heavy, extremely heavy... It was a confusing and frightening protest. Friends on the street asked each other, what is it that they are negotiating? Nobody knew.⁶⁰

In Barranca supporters of the *paro del nororiente* argued that the *paro cívico por la vida* had exhausted local movements, raised political tensions and insecurity in the region, and thus undermined the *campesino* movement. Some believed that the *paro del nororiente* should take precedence over human rights protest because the latter was a distraction. The energy required to carry out a *paro cívico* was significant. It was an exhausting process, and some *paro del nororiente* organizers feared that there would not be enough momentum to carry out both.⁶¹

As part of the *paro del nororiente*, more than 1,000 *campesinos* arrived in Barranca on June 9, 1987 and occupied a church in the Barrio Palmira, where they would stay for five days. On the second day, the city’s commerce and transport was shut down because of protests organized by local movements in solidarity with the peasants. Local movements also took advantage of the opportunity to underscore their demands for increased investments in the city’s physical and social infrastructure. Barricades were set up and a solidarity march organized by the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*.

⁵⁹ “Dirección Liberal condena el paro del nororiente,” *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), June 7, 1987.

⁶⁰ Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero*, 35-36.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

As army helicopters flew overhead, violence broke out between some of the demonstrators and police.⁶² In a press release the *Coordinadora Popular* condemned the behaviour of the police, whom they accused of acts of intimidation against a peaceful march for which the mayor's office had given organizers a permit.

The work of uniting *campesino* and urban movements, which was central to the sustaining of social movements in Barranca, sometimes involved the management and negotiation of divergent interests and political positions. The impact of the *paro del nororiente* was itself the subject of partisan and social differences. Some argued that it did nothing to compel the *campesino* movement forward or achieve its stated aims. The *campesinos* demanded government commitments to improve public services and infrastructure in rural areas, and to stop the harassment and repression of rural communities by armed groups.⁶³ The ELN guerrillas declared their support for the *paro del nororiente*, but described the results as inconclusive in terms of *campesino* support for the ELN: "...in the northeast there are more than 100,000 peasants and people in this regional protest, but we still cannot say what our total strength is within the mass movement"⁶⁴. Influential UP Barranca city councillor and journalist Ismael Jaimes observed that while the *paro del nororiente* was supported by progressive movements in the region, it did not provide them with a sufficient basis for overcoming partisan

⁶² "Disturbios en Barrancabermeja," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), June 10, 1987.

⁶³ Jorge Iván, et al., *Los discursos del conflicto: espacio público, paros cívicos y prensa en Colombia* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 1998), 44.

⁶⁴ Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica*, 88.

differences. Concretely, Jaimes said that *campesino* and civic movements were both suffering the toll of successive *paros cívicos*.⁶⁵

Stretched thin and divided, local movements felt powerless to stop the advance of paramilitarism. In the late 1980s it seemed nobody was immune, not even priests. A major setback for the civic-popular movement was the departure from Barranca of Father Eduardo Díaz after 17 years at the head of the *Pastoral Social*. In April 1987 he left Barranca because of death threats and an attempt on his life.⁶⁶ Barranca's Bishop Juan Francisco Sarasti publicly supported Díaz, and his work with *Pastoral Social*, but it was not enough to convince Díaz to stay.⁶⁷ In April 1987 Javier Álvarez, a member of the De La Salle Order of teachers, was assassinated in northeastern Antioquia, a few kilometres from Barranca. Álvarez, a lay missionary, had spent more than a decade working in *campesino* communities in the Magdalena Medio.⁶⁸ In May 1987 Father Bernardo López was murdered in the department of Sucre.⁶⁹ Four years earlier, Father López had been a key witness in helping judicial authorities identify and investigate early members of the paramilitary group MAS. In September 1987, another activist priest, Father Bernardo

⁶⁵ Ismael Jaimes, "El paro del nororiente positiva experiencia, problemas comunes y un poco de geografía," *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), July 1987.

⁶⁶ *Familia Diocesana* 16 (May 1987), 5

⁶⁷ Father Eduardo Díaz emigrated to Vancouver, Canada, where he spent many years working as a priest amongst Latin American immigrants and teaching courses on liberation theology at the theological college at the University of British Columbia.

⁶⁸ In 1985 Brother Álvarez was recognized by the Medellín daily newspaper *El Colombiano* with an award for his humanitarian work. See *Familia Diocesana* 16 (May 1987), 7.

⁶⁹ *Familia Diocesana* 17 (June 1987), 1.

Marín was forced to flee his parish in the Magdalena Medio because of his condemnation of paramilitaries.⁷⁰

The silencing of progressive voices within the Catholic Church augmented the power of armed movements. On October 11, 1987 Patriotic Union chief Jaime Pardo Leal was murdered in the countryside just west of Bogotá.⁷¹ The previous year, Pardo had won 328,753 votes as UP presidential candidate in the largest show of voter support for any left-wing candidate in Colombian history to that point. His death sparked a four-day *paro cívico* in Barranca. It was unlike any *paro cívico* that the city had experienced in the past. From the very first day, armed men joined the protest in the name of both the FARC and the ELN. For the first time in the city's history, there was combat between the guerrillas and the army in the streets of the city during a popular protest. The guerrilla set up checkpoints on the outskirts of the city and patrolled the streets of the northeastern and southeastern *barrios*.⁷² Army reinforcements were sent from Bucaramanga. It was a remarkable moment of shared fury that united *milicianos* from the ELN and the FARC.⁷³ It was also a key turning point that saw the rise of the guerrilla at the expense of civil society.

Independent of the strategies adopted by the local social movements, the guerrillas had seized the initiative, offering the local population hope that an armed popular movement would be able to defend them against attacks. Through the middle of

⁷⁰ Javier Giraldo, *Colombia: The Genocidal Democracy* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1996), 45.

⁷¹ Dudley, *Walking Ghosts*, 104.

⁷² Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero*, 39.

⁷³ In September 1987 the ELN, FARC and other guerrilla groups entered into a cooperation agreement for the first time in their more than 20 years of coexistence, creating the *Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar*. See Harnecker, *Unidad que multiplica*, 107.

the 1980s, the guerrillas, most notably the ELN, established themselves amongst the population of the popular *barrios*. *Juntas de acción comunal*, or elected neighbourhood councils, served a key mobilising function during *paros cívicos* and other protests. They were thus very appealing to both guerrillas and political parties attempting to expand their social bases. The guerrillas offered protection to the *juntas de acción comunal* but did not clearly seek to set agendas or undermine ongoing work. As one Barranca activist said in an interview, "...the guerrilla came in saying 'we have come to fight for the same thing, you can count on our support', so there was a feeling amongst the people, that we are protected, but nobody ever said that we are allied with [the guerrillas], that we are with the ELN [*que somos elenos*]"⁷⁴.

Towards the end of the 1980s, as the circle of military and paramilitary repression closed in on Barranca, the guerrillas began to establish a stronger armed presence in the city itself, depriving local organizations of room to breathe. The *paro armado* was thus invented, using the most important symbol of Barranca's civic movement, the *paro cívico*, as a tactic of the armed struggle. It would be misleading to create binary distinctions that separate the history of the guerrillas in Barranca from the history of all other political and social forces. As we have seen in previous chapters, the origins of the guerrillas can indeed be traced through the social history of the city, back to the 1960s when the ELN and FARC were created, right up until the arrival of thousands of displaced people from rural areas under guerrilla influence. It is, nonetheless, crucial to differentiate between *convivencia*, *simpatía* and *militancia*. These terms reflect different levels of interaction with the guerrillas, and each term can be used to describe different

⁷⁴ Anonymous interview (Barrancabermeja 2004). CINEP Archives, Bogotá.

grades of tolerance, ideological identification, or direct involvement. It is one thing to live in a city, town or rural area where the guerrilla is present, and quite another to carry a weapon. As human rights groups in Colombia have insisted, a person's place of residence or ideological leanings cannot define him or her as a combatant in international or Colombian law.

Conclusions: *Dolor y Rabia*

The decision by Barranca activists to begin to work collectively around human rights concerns arose out of a moment of deep crisis. During the late 1980s, paramilitary groups and the Colombian military opened an urban front in Barranca. At the same time, Marxist guerrillas consolidated their presence in the city, acted with greater audacity than ever before, and began to utilize street protests as venues for the validation of their goals. There had never before been a moment of such fervour mixed with such fear for Barranca's civic-popular movement. Record numbers of people took to the streets in response to political killings, and protests became increasingly spontaneous. Spontaneous outbursts of grief, anger and frustration, reflected a fundamental change in the relationship between social movement organizing and popular protest. In conversation with historian Alejo Vargas in the late 1980s, Ezequiel Romero, long-serving municipal councilor in Barranca on behalf of the Communist Party and former trade union leader, reflected on the spontaneity with which protests were being carried out: "It is part of the culture of the people of Barrancabermeja. So much so that when

something violent occurs, if they kill a leader, the city automatically stops. Before, you had to go into the neighborhoods and organize people into committees”.⁷⁵

The longer-term implications of changes taking place in the culture of popular protest in Barranca were not yet clear. However, the decision on the part of many Barranca activists to take up the banner of human rights was a meaningful attempt to channel popular indignation into collective civic action. Anchored by the *Unión Sindical Obrera* oil workers union and the *Coordinadora Popular* civil society coalition, the nascent human rights movement inherited a commitment to challenging structures of power, not simply protecting lives. Activist Jairo Chaparro reflects on the legacy of the many protests organized in the late 1980s: “Our culture of fraternity and solidarity, our culture of the *paro* could be felt on every street corner, in every house, in all of its strength. That will never end”.⁷⁶ The next challenge would be to carry out an agenda of human rights protection in a context of increasing complexity, tension, and violence.

⁷⁵ Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*, 152.

⁷⁶ Chaparro, *Recuerdos de un tropelero*, 27.

Chapter 6

Defending Human Rights in the Midst of Armed Conflict

Accusing human rights workers of working on behalf of the guerrillas is a national phenomenon. It is a way of discrediting them. But I think it is a mistake because what human rights workers do is to affirm democracy, to affirm the social rule of law. These types of things are not understood by the Colombian state.¹

Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, co-founder and first president of CREDHOS

Introduction: The Formation of CREDHOS

In the late 1980s paramilitary forces attacked social activists and ordinary citizens in Barrancabermeja with shocking brutality, inspiring popular protests that opened pathways to collective grief and anger. The Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS) was conceived in 1987 by like-minded activists over a series of informal encounters at *paros cívicos* and rallies.² Through the leadership of a highly regarded young lawyer, a charismatic city councillor, a high-ranking oil workers' union leader, and several prominent community organizers, amongst others, CREDHOS quickly became the central node in a regional human rights network that involved most of the major social and political groups in the Magdalena Medio. CREDHOS' success was evidenced at the meetings they organized in 1988 and 1989, which brought together hundreds of individuals representing the most important civil society organizations and government human rights bodies in the Magdalena Medio and Bogotá. Though initially

¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

² CREDHOS was formally/legally established on July 7, 1988. But in all documents recounting the history of the organization, December 10, 1987 is given as the founding date. Not coincidentally, December 10 is International Human Rights Day, marking the date that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations.

put forward by a relatively small core group, the idea of a human rights committee captured the spirit of the time. CREDHOS functioned both as an advocacy group and a rallying point around which the community-at-large and local organizations could convene and develop strategies for human rights protection.³ CREDHOS provided legal counsel to victims, undertook research, carried out educational activities, and acted as interlocutor with local authorities, including the military, on behalf of the victims of political violence.

By 1988 the defence of human rights was the main reason for popular protest in Colombia.⁴ Human rights protest was a national phenomenon involving a broad spectrum of social and labour groups. The country was on the brink of a profound crisis. Paramilitary and guerrilla organizations were expanding their interests and influence, fuelled by the rents extracted from the illegal trade in cocaine. Between the death of teenager Sandra Rondón Pinto in April 1987 and the end of CREDHOS' first year of work in December 1988, nine *paros cívicos* were organized to protest political violence in the city.⁵ The national homicide rate in 1988 was 62 per 100,000 people, nearly triple what it had been a decade earlier when President Julio César Turbay Ayala introduced the National Security Doctrine.⁶ The creation of CREDHOS in 1987 was a direct response on the part of activists in Barrancabermeja to the fact that violence was remaking their city. It was an attempt to renew and defend Barranca's tradition of popular protest, bolstering the drive for social change. By promoting respect for human rights and

³ CREDHOS, *Estatutos de Constitución*, 1. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁴ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 235.

⁵ Isamel Jaimes, "El Frente Comun: un reto y una esperanza", *La Opinión*, December 1988, 3.

⁶ Marcelo M. Giugale, Olivier Lafourcade and Connie Luff, eds., *Colombia: The Economic Foundation of Peace* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2003), 92.

demonstrating the link between violence and structural inequalities, CREDHOS defined human rights in the context of a widespread struggle for social justice and aspired to create a broad consensus among social movement activists in Barranca.

In Colombia in the late 1980s human rights activists aspired first and foremost to expose the "killer networks" comprised of regular military and private paramilitary forces that were responsible for the majority of attacks on civilians.⁷ Human rights activists used the following calculation: on the one hand, would-be human rights violators must weigh the political costs of their actions; and on the other hand, activists aim to maximize the "unacceptable costs" of carrying out attacks.⁸ Generally speaking, governments do not seek negative attention for the abuse of human rights. In political and legal terms, this means human rights activists work to expose human rights violators and challenge impunity. This would prove extraordinarily challenging, as the Colombian military withdrew into the shadows and shady paramilitary forces carried out the majority of killings. At the same time, CREDHOS had to earn the trust of the general population, while negotiating the pressures exerted by political parties, guerrilla groups, civil society organizations, state security forces, and others.

This chapter takes an in-depth look at the possibilities and constraints of human rights organizing in a conflict area. In the first half of the chapter I trace the formation and early activities of CREDHOS, with a focus on the organization's attempts to raise awareness around human rights through public meetings. In the second half of the

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks: The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States* (New York: Human Rights Watch, November 1996).

⁸ Liam Mahony and Luis Enrique Eguren, *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1997), 85.

chapter I look in detail at the forms that the dirty war took in the Magdalena Medio. Paramilitary agents carried out a series of high-profile assassinations of civic-popular movement leaders in Barranca in 1987 and 1988. Paramilitary groups established themselves in rural areas to the east and west of Barranca, causing displacement of the rural population, mobilization by *campesino* groups, and an increasing sense of claustrophobia within the city itself. In both cases, paramilitary violence inspired popular protests that were increasingly spontaneous and volatile. CREDHOS itself was born out of spontaneous *paros cívicos* and mass commemoration of the victims of violence, and thus reflected the popular *zeitgeist*. Capturing that energy and translating it into a workable formula for social and political action would prove tremendously complicated. Through detailed accounts of the impact of political violence in the Magdalena Medio, I intend to lay bare the dangers to which activists were exposed on a daily basis in the late 1980s and underscore the extraordinary challenges that face human rights groups in areas of armed conflict. As we shall see in the following chapter, the consensus around human rights in Barranca proved extraordinarily difficult to sustain.

The Legitimacy of Human Rights in Conflict Areas

Mainstream scholars of human rights demand that human rights groups rise above the fray of armed conflict, and present unbiased and empirical perspectives on the impact of political violence. In his critique of the way in which human rights are discussed in Colombia, philosopher Luis Alberto Restrepo laments that “pluralist, impartial and credible human rights organizations do not exist” in Colombia.⁹ Restrepo argues that

⁹ Bergquist, Peñaranda and Sánchez, eds., *Violence in Colombia*, 125.

Colombian human rights organizations have used human rights as a political banner to promote special interests and wage war on the Colombian state. He adds that the Colombian state has, in turn, used the rhetoric of human rights to deflect criticism and undermine civil society. Restrepo concedes, however, that extreme circumstances have made impartiality nearly impossible in the Colombian case.¹⁰ Restrepo's frustration is understandable. Indeed, many human rights activists have struggled to achieve consensus around human rights, only to find themselves hindered by complex partisan politics. To what extent is it realistic to make such high-minded demands of human rights activists? Can the principles of "impartiality and objectivity" be achieved?¹¹

Human rights norms and principles are shaped by the narratives of human suffering. For the embattled social movement activists who pioneered the defense of human rights in Barranca, the question of basic human rights was indivisible from the issues of social and economic justice, regional development, political recognition, and nationalism. It is not the fact of violence that unites human rights activists in Barranca. It is the fact that the violence has been directed against social, labour and opposition movements. CREDHOS was more than just a non-governmental organization (NGO).¹²

¹⁰ Bergquist, Peñaranda and Sánchez, eds., *Violence in Colombia*, 114.

¹¹ Amnesty International operates a global network of non-governmental human rights activists from a central office in London, England. Amnesty International-affiliated groups do not report on the countries in which they are based, in order to ensure the impartiality of the information it publishes. Amnesty International closed its office in Colombia in 1997 in response to death threats against its staff in Bogotá.

¹² The distinction between what constitutes an NGO and what constitutes a social movement is the subject of considerable debate in Colombia. Political scientists Bolívar, Posada and Segura argue that violence in Colombia has had the effect of weakening broad social movements. They write: "...everyone is left trying to survive in their own small fiefdoms" which "negates the possibility of the construction of a collective process". In the authors' view, NGOs can nonetheless play a positive role in promoting dialogue between social actors and rebuilding the bases for collective action. Ingrid

It was an expression of Barranca's popular movement. The same could be said of movements that represent victims of guerrilla violence.¹³ Their authority is not determined by their even-handedness but by the shared experiences of the people for whom they speak.

CREDHOS held its first public event, a regional human rights forum, in September 1988. The organization laid out a platform for human rights advocacy and education, and spoke about the need to confront violence through peaceful means. CREDHOS' efforts were a reflection of the political moment. *Campesino* groups and trade union activists across the country were also utilizing the language of human rights to protest attacks on their membership. Over the next 20 years human rights would come to dominate political debate in Colombia, including discussions around U.S. and other countries' foreign policy, international trade and cooperation with the war-torn South American country.

On December 1, 1987 in Bogotá a group of Colombia's top academics were joined by national NGOs and government officials for a day-long colloquium to reflect on human rights in Colombia. The opening address was delivered by the *Consejero Presidencial para los Derechos Humanos* (Presidential Advisor on Human Rights). The *Consejería Presidencial para los Derechos Humanos* was created in 1987 by Liberal President Virgilio Barco, in part as a response to the grave crisis facing the country. The first person to fill the position was lawyer and academic Álvaro Tirado Mejía, an historian who had been a member of the *Comité Permanente para los Derechos*

Bolívar, Adriana Posada and Renata Segura, "El papel de la ONGs en la sociedad civil: la construcción de lo público," *Controversia* 170 (1997), 67.

¹³ The best known Colombian NGO that works mainly against guerrilla violence is the kidnapping victims' support group *Fundación País Libre*.

Humanos, Colombia's first and largest non-governmental human rights network.¹⁴

Tirado had been friends with Hector Abad Gómez, the former head of the *Comité Permanente* who just months earlier had been assassinated during his campaign as a candidate for mayor of Bogotá. In his speech before the assembled speakers and guests at the colloquium, Tirado emphasized the link between democracy and human rights, taking care to distance the Barco government from the small-minded policies of previous governments: "The government of Colombia through the practice of tolerance and conciliation has rejected the National Security Doctrine and broken with it".¹⁵

At a time of rapidly escalating violence, the government of President Virgilio Barco took several steps towards the formal recognition of human rights. President Barco officially declared paramilitary groups illegal, signed a peace agreement with the M-19 guerrillas, and convened the constituent assembly that would produce a new constitution to replace the Colombian Constitution of 1886.¹⁶ For the first time in Colombian history, the government was creating norms and structures to monitor and promote state security forces' compliance with human rights norms. It was during this period that government functionaries and progressive social movements alike began to see Colombia's conflict through the prism of human rights. Colombians were experiencing the diffusion of human rights discourse carried out by civil society organizations and some government agencies, and the creation of new domestic laws and institutions. It might have been an ideal scenario for real improvements, except for the

¹⁴ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 222.

¹⁵ Álvaro Tirado Mejía, "Derechos humanos y democracia en Colombia", *Análisis Político* 2 (September-December 1987), 50.

¹⁶ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 215.

simultaneous emergence of new and virulent forms of paramilitary violence that challenged the human rights paradigm. Journalist Alfredo Molano writes:

The clear collaboration among the official military, the police and paramilitaries is well-documented. In fact, some observers have likened the increase in paramilitary activity to “privatization” of the state’s repressive apparatus, providing the government with “plausible deniability” while it seeks to wipe out guerrilla and other challenges to its rule.¹⁷

Whereas human rights language rendered political violence committed by state agents legible, paramilitarism rendered it impenetrable.¹⁸ For human rights activists, the spread of paramilitarism signified an alibi for state-sponsored repression.

The Biography of a Human Rights Movement

In his authoritative treatment of popular protest in Colombia during the Cold War era, historian Mauricio Archila defines social movements as collective processes that confront various forms of injustice and inequality. Social movements are immersed in multidimensional conflicts that cannot be reduced to economic or class factors alone.¹⁹ Charles Tilly defines a social movement as “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities”.²⁰ Tilly posits that social movements are comprised of diverse individual actors, including professional campaigners, organizers and lobbyists, as well as rank-and-file members of large groupings such as trade unions. Joe Foweraker writes: “Despite the range of social

¹⁷ Alfredo Molano, *The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia*, Trans. Daniel Bland (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁹ Archila, *Idas y venidas*, 74.

²⁰ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 111.

movement theory, a satisfactory definition of social movements remains elusive. Nonetheless, there is some agreement that the social movement must be defined not as a group of any kind but as a process”.²¹ It is the mass mobilization of people that distinguishes social movements. In the case of Colombia, Archila favours regional-level histories of social movements that allow us to understand such movements as “producers of social identities”.²² Understanding the sources of social identity in Barranca is critical to understanding why human rights discourse took hold there. It is therefore important to know the people who established CREDHOS, the social movement processes they were engaged in, and how they articulated their objectives.

From 1985 to 1992 Communist Party activist Ismael Jaimes published *La Opinión*, a monthly newspaper dedicated to reporting human rights and social movement news in Barrancabermeja. *La Opinión* was initially conceived as the official newspaper of the Patriotic Union (UP) political party in the Magdalena Medio region, but in reality it reflected a broad diversity of opinion and covered all social movement activity sympathetically. Right up until his murder in 1992 Ismael Jaimes lived, breathed, ate and drank local politics, and counted people from across the political spectrum amongst his close collaborators and friends. In *La Opinión* he published a special column dedicated to gossip, rumours and humour called *el Rincón de la social-bacanería*. The term *bacanería* is derived from the word *bacano*, which is an adjective that translates as “cool”, “amazing”, or “brilliant”. In Barranca it is the kind of thing you might say to describe a hot new salsa record, a great night out on the town, or an inspiring speech at a May Day rally. The term *social-bacanería* sums up the way in which activists from

²¹ Joe Foweraker, *Theorizing Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 23.

²² *Ibid.*, 67.

Barranca combined activism and pleasure. In July 1987 in *el Rincón de la social-bacanería*, Jaimes published a manifesto for an imaginary social movement, the *Frente único de Macondo*.²³ Among the tenets included in Jaimes' manifesto were the following: "1. Up with life, 2. No prohibition on love at the barricades, 3. No prohibition on partying." And it ends with "For the right to invent things, to be creative and to give flight to dreams, onwards."²⁴

Towards the end of the 1980s, daily life for activists in Barranca was a surreal mix of freedom and fear. Friends, colleagues and family were being killed, yet social movements surged. People fell in love at the barricades and at the parties that sometimes lasted through the night in defiance of curfews and the threat of violence. Exiled *barranqueña* Luisa Serrano – a former member of CREDHOS, teachers' union activist and volunteer with the national human rights group *Justicia y Paz* – describes Barranca as a place of opportunity, of solidarity, and of hedonism:

My view of Barranca is that it is a school for citizen convergence. There are exceptions to prove the rule, but I think that this is something that has been maintained. This joyful spirit, festive [*parandero*] in a way, where nobody will kill you over a difference of opinion. That is something that came from elsewhere. I did not have to live through what came afterward, the *narcos*, the *paracos*. No, you could dress however you wanted, you could put an earring in your ear whether you were a man or a woman, wear your hair long or short. Barranca is a libertarian place, it is part of its charm. This land of joy, of solidarity, diversity is part of that. It is seductive. I know it sounds sexist... but Barranca takes hold of you, you fall in love, you do not suffer the city, you get

²³ This was a play on the name of the surreal goings-on in the town of Macondo, as imagined by Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and has since become a synonym for anything outlandish or bizarre, as in: "Did you hear about what happened last night? *Era macondiano*".

²⁴ The original Spanish is worth quoting directly: "1. *Por la vida, p' adelante con todo*, 2. *Prohibido prohibir los amores de barricada*, 3. *Prohibido prohibir la rumba... Por el derecho a inventar cosas, ser creativos y darle rueda suelta a la fantasía, p' adelante*". "El Frente Unico de Macondo: capítulo del Magdalena Medio" decreta," *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), July 1987.

pleasure from it.²⁵

Barranca was for many decades a place where people had come to escape violence, where authority could be snubbed and life celebrated. It is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of CREDHOS and the many social movements, trade unions and individuals who took up the struggle for human rights, that they were able to maintain this sense of defiance throughout the years of the dirty war.

Twenty-three organizations participated in CREDHOS' first assembly. From the outset, CREDHOS' founding members hoped to build a consensus in the Magdalena Medio region around the importance of rights and the responsibility of the national state to protect people from violent and arbitrary treatment. In order to do so, they had to work with a variety of social and political actors at the local level. In its first year of work CREDHOS was financed by the Foundation for the Promotion of Popular Education and Culture (FUNPROCEP), a Bucaramanga-based NGO that has provided support to NGOs and community-based initiatives in the department of Santander since 1982.²⁶ All of the same groups that participated in the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* also participated in CREDHOS. CREDHOS functioned autonomously, yet was an expression of the will of the *Coordinadora Popular* to confront the problem of political violence. In order to properly understand the way in which Barranca's human rights movement developed, it is worthwhile knowing the people who laid the foundations as well as the people who joined them.

²⁵ In the original interview in Spanish, Luisa Serrano uses the term “*encoñe*”, not seductive, which has a more explicit sexual meaning. Interview with autor (Bogotá, March 14, 2006).

²⁶ Subsequent financial support came from a Jesuit-run organization called *Programa Caminos por la Paz*. CREDHOS, “Creación de la Regional de Derechos Humanos del Magdalena Medio”, (February 1990), 2. CREHDOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

Lawyers Jorge Gómez Lizarazo and César Torres, municipal councillor Jael Quiroga, and trade unionist Rafael Gómez were amongst the first to discuss the idea of a human rights committee in Barranca. Jael Quiroga arrived in Barranca in 1981, having recently graduated from the National University in Bogotá. She was married to a petroleum engineer and lived in the Ecopetrol camp at El Centro, an enclave set up decades earlier by Tropical Oil where oil company managers and their spouses enjoyed a country club lifestyle. Quiroga was isolated from the real Barranca, and seemed an unlikely candidate to lead a human rights organization. And she remembers well having to earn the trust of the wider Barranca community. How could this pampered “engineer’s wife” from Bogotá possibly appreciate the struggles of local people? But previous activist experience at the National University in Bogotá served her well, as did her self-confidence. She became involved in local politics, and soon she found herself at the head of *empresas varias*, the municipal public works department.

The public works department managed Barranca’s marketplaces, the slaughterhouse, street cleaning and maintenance, water, and many other services that had for years been central concerns of local politics. Quiroga was in a unique position to experience the tensions that arose around basic issues of services and infrastructure. More importantly, she had to work directly with all of the main community, business, labour and professional organizations in the city. In the 1980s Barranca’s municipal government still identified broadly with the city’s rebellious past. Quiroga saw the old politics that pitted *la empresa* against the city from both sides, but soon came to identify with the culture of protest. It was during these protests that the idea of a human rights

committee was first discussed. Quiroga remembers developing a friendship with CREDHOS co-founder Jorge Gómez Lizarazo at demonstrations:

We met there, in the middle of the excitement of the *paro cívico*, of the *éxodos campesinos*. We saw each other at events, when the peasants came over from Yondó, from the Cimitarra River Valley, from the south of the department of Bolívar. They came to Barranca and took over the *Parque Infantil*, and they lived there. There was Manuel Gustavo Chacón, getting involved. Right there they slaughtered their animals for food and prepared their meals... annoying local business owners and all of that... that is where we started to work with Jorge Gómez Lizarazo.²⁷

Quiroga was well known to Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, who served as legal counsel to the local peasant and trade union organizations with whom the city had to work on development and infrastructure issues. Through informal conversations held over a period of months during *paros cívicos* and *marchas campesinas*, the group agreed to launch CREDHOS as a pluralist committee in which all expressions of social and political activism would be welcome. Thus, while the inner circle of CREDHOS was relatively small, its potential reach was broad.

From the beginning CREDHOS functioned out of Jorge Gómez Lizarazo's storefront office, located on the second floor of a small commercial block overlooking Barranca's central market. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo was CREDHOS' president and its most visible spokesperson from 1987 through 1992. He was well known in Barranca as a lawyer who worked on behalf of oil workers and *campesinos*. Born in Bucaramanga and trained at the National University in Bogotá, Gómez graduated from law school in 1974 and moved to Barranca to assume a post as a judge at the Barrancabermeja Municipal Court. After 1977 he served as legal counsel to *campesino* and trade union movements,

²⁷ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

as well as to political prisoners and housing activists.²⁸ For a full decade prior to the founding of CREDHOS, Jorge Gómez Lizarazo's office had been a hub of social justice work in the city.

Jorge Gómez Lizarazo believed that the defence of human rights required a broad political strategy, engaging a number of different sectors within civil society, and that the legal defence of the victims of violence, in and of itself, was an insufficient approach. As Gómez recalls, a series of high profile political assassinations helped bring the issue of human rights into focus for the original CREDHOS members: "I was joined by some of the people from social movement organizations that I had worked for, unions, and individuals on the municipal council, like Rafael Gómez and Jael Quiroga, and together we started to look at creating a human rights committee".²⁹ CREDHOS served as an advocacy organization that reflected the concerns of a well established activist community, spoke out publicly, offered analysis, maintained good relations with city government officials, and denounced political crimes on behalf of victims. Jorge Gómez Lizarazo has said that education had to be the group's first objective. The people of the region did not need to be taught how to recognize injustice, but how to use legal measures to defend their human rights.³⁰

From the beginning CREDHOS' greatest asset was that it was immersed in a deep current of activism that engaged many sectors of Barranca society. The four pillars of Barranca's popular movement in the 1970-1990 period were organized labour, peasants, the Catholic Church, and urban squatters. Four institutions – the *Unión Sindical Obrera*

²⁸ Jorge Enrique Gómez Lizarazo, Hoja de Vida. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

²⁹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

³⁰ "Los derechos humanos," *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), January 1988.

(USO) oil workers union, the *Pastoral Social* program of the Diocese of Barrancabermeja, the National Association of Peasants (ANUC) and the *juntas de acción comunal* neighbourhood councils – can be cited as the greatest contributors to the development of an autonomous and progressive civil society in Barranca. All were present in Barranca in 1987 at the formation of CREDHOS. Even the mayor of Barranca, a Liberal allied to Horacio Serpa’s FILA movement, participated in the creation of CREDHOS. As CREDHOS co-founder and *Pastoral Social* activist Irene Villamizar suggests, CREDHOS aspired to rise above partisan squabbling:

At that time Jorge Gómez Villamizar was mayor of Barranca, who later became governor [of Santander]. He participated in CREDHOS. He supported us and said that he was in agreement with what CREDHOS was defending... so he played a positive role, we the support of a recognized authority. CREDHOS played such an important role, we could say that CREDHOS had more authority than the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*. It could rise above the political parties. It was a pluralist project, it was not defined by politics, but by the defense of human rights.³¹

Individuals who worked with various political parties, neighbourhood-based *juntas de acción comunal*, and various trade unions and service organizations were all involved in CREDHOS’ earliest activities. The individuals who contributed to the early formation of CREDHOS did not officially represent these constituencies. Nevertheless, each was a key link to a broader network.

CREDHOS’ Early Days: Setting an Agenda

On September 28, 1988, CREDHOS convened a public event in favour of “peace and human rights” in the Magdalena Medio region. The forum was held at the offices of the municipal council, with a number of city officials participating. Dozens of local

³¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

activists from the trade union movement, progressive Catholic organizations, left-wing and mainstream political parties, and community groups were present. A sizeable number of delegates representing prominent national human rights organizations were also in attendance. The Bogotá-based Permanent Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared, the Jesuit-run Centre for Popular Education and Research (CINEP), the “José Alvear Restrepo” Lawyers Collective, and Colombia’s oldest human rights NGO, the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners, were joined that day by Bernardo Echeverry Ossa, delegate for the Internal Affairs Agency of the Colombian government. Local police and army commanders, media and the general public were also invited to participate.

When CREDHOS registered as an independent not-for-profit corporation in April of 1989, its stated objectives were “the preparation and training of promoters of social rights and human rights through popular organizations working in the community, in order that their knowledge be used to engage in the defence of their rights” and “to carry out appropriate legal actions and denunciations, in order to make visible the effective defence of human rights”.³² The decision to incorporate CREDHOS and establish internal governance rules served to legitimize the organization as an independent voice for human rights. Giving CREDHOS a formal structure that included a Board of Directors and a General Assembly guaranteed that local organizations could participate in decision-making concerning staff hiring, and decisions about where resources should be spent. CREDHOS’ first Board of Directors included members of the *Pastoral Social*, the

³² Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, “Estatutos del Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos”. Barrancabermeja: April 26, 1989, 2-3. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

Unión Sindical Obrera, the Teachers' Union of Santander, and the Communist Party of Colombia, amongst other groups.

A second, more ambitious, forum on human rights in the Magdalena Medio took place in July 1989. Attended by more than 100 associations, NGOs, unions and government institutions, the *Encuentro Regional Sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia* raised CREDHOS' profile and made human rights the focus of political debate in the city.³³ Representatives of CREDHOS, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners (CSPP), and the National Association of Peasants (ANUC) delivered substantive speeches to a plenary comprising almost 900 people.³⁴ The Colombian state was represented by the *Procuraduría* (Internal Affairs Agency) and *Personería* (local office of the Public Advocate). Also in attendance were spokespeople for all of the major Colombian guerrilla groups and their associated political movements.³⁵ It was an event unique for the time, and one that would never be repeated. Mayor Rafael Fernández provided the customary opening address, after which an organizing committee was approved that included national and regional union leaders, municipal councillors from various political

³³ Amongst the members of the organizing committee of the meeting were a variety of government and non-government entities, including CREDHOS, the USO, ANUC, FEDEPETROL, the Liberal Party, and the local offices of both the *Personería* and *Procuraduría*. Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "Comité Organizador Encuentro Regional Sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia letter to Comisión Derechos Humanos Concejo Municipal", June 1, 1989, Barrancabermeja, Colombia. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

³⁴ Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "Informe del Encuentro Regional Sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Colombia" Barrancabermeja: julio 1989, 12. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

³⁵ These are cited in the final report on the forum as including ¡A Luchar!, the Patriotic Union, M -19, FARC, ELN, Communist Party of Colombia and the EPL. *Ibid.*, 13.

parties, Senator Gustavo Osorio, member of the House of Representatives César Carrillo, and Catholic priest Nel Beltrán.

The issue of the guerrilla presence at the forum was not formally addressed by CREDHOS directly, or anyone else for that matter. Spokespeople for the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) announced to the assembly that they had just freed two soldiers from the Luciano D'Luyer counterinsurgency battalion located in San Vicente de Chucurí and declared their commitment to observe the laws of war.³⁶ One of the longest speeches made during the forum was a discussion of the “humanization of the conflict”, delivered by a representative of *¡A Luchar!*, a social movement linked to the ELN.³⁷

CREDHOS had convened a truly broad spectrum of groups – including social movements, business associations, municipal government, the Catholic Church and political parties – to overcome their philosophical differences.³⁸ CREDHOS’ first president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo is widely credited by his former colleagues for imbuing CREDHOS with an ethic of non-partisanship. Rafael Gómez states: “Jorge Gómez Lizarazo has two important qualities. Politically, he is open-minded. Personally, he is a good friend to many people. He respects people and respects their opinions”.³⁹ This was partly the result of Jorge Gómez Lizarazo’s personal commitment to pluralism, his background as a lawyer for diverse causes, and the fact that he was neither a member of a political party nor the spokesperson for a particular social movement.

CREDHOS called upon a broad network of like-minded groups to participate in the fight for human rights in terms that took the debate beyond technical discussions

³⁶ Ibid., 13.

³⁷ Ibid., 35.

³⁸ Ibid., 50.

³⁹ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

around legal norms or clinical description of human rights atrocities, and into the realm of advocacy for social and political change. It was a bold strategy. In the conference's final declaration, participants agreed that the current state of affairs in Barranca qualified as a "dirty war" and called on the Colombian state to guarantee the full application of Colombian and international law. Their list of demands included the following points:

1. Respect for the right to life.
2. Compliance with and monitoring of all international human rights instruments signed and ratified by the Colombian State.
3. The lifting of the State of Siege.
4. The dismantling of paramilitary groups.
5. Full respect for International Humanitarian Law by all sides in the conflict, including insurgent groups, and the implementation of political and economic reforms that assure greater democracy and social justice.

Those who signed were a veritable "who's who" of Colombian civil society, including national trade unions, pioneering human rights groups such as the Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES), the National Association of Peasants (ANUC), dozens of local neighbourhood *juntas de acción comunal*, women's organizations, and CREDHOS. The Final Declaration of the conference clearly stated that the defence of human rights cannot be viewed as a technocratic or narrow political concern, but rather as "a struggle... understood in socio-political context".⁴⁰ CREDHOS declared its support for a national debate on the exploitation of oil and other natural resources "**in defense of national sovereignty**" [emphasis in the original].⁴¹ Given the scope of the problem, CREDHOS argued, all civil society organizations had a responsibility to take up the cause of human rights protection.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The Murder of Manuel Gustavo Chacón

The violence unleashed over the next four years went largely unchallenged by the city government. The Liberal-FILA group never took a leadership role in convening citizens around human rights. The opportunity for Barranca's political establishment to stand alongside the city's social movement leaders in calling for local development and human rights was slipping away. The *paros cívicos por la vida* had demonstrated that there was an appetite for change amongst a substantial proportion of Barranca's citizens. But the threat of violence from paramilitary groups eroded the consensus that brought people together in a previous era. One by one the leaders who embodied the spirit of the city's civic-popular movement were being killed.

One of the most important assassinations in Barranca's history took place just one month after CREDHOS' launch. The assassination of *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO) leader Manuel Gustavo Chacón on January 15, 1988 marked a particularly dark turning-point in Barranca's history.⁴² Chacón's death remains symbolic of the price that activists pay for their work in Barranca and the oftentimes violent repression that the oil workers union has suffered in particular.⁴³ Following Chacón's murder in January 1988 dozens of USO members, including a number of leaders, or former leaders, were killed.⁴⁴

Portraits of the fallen leaders of the USO are displayed prominently in the front foyer of the national headquarters of the USO in Barranca. Chacón's likeness stands out. The

⁴² "For the USO, the death of Chacón, the poet of the future and of direct action, was a terrible blow, an open wound". Álvaro Zapata Domínguez, "Negociación, conflicto, mitos y poder en la gestión de las relaciones laborales en Ecopetrol" (master's thesis, Universidad del Valle, 2007), 19.

⁴³ In 2002 the *Plazoleta de Ecopetrol*, the small plaza in front of the national headquarters of Ecopetrol in Bogotá, was named after Manuel Gustavo Chacón.

⁴⁴ Between January 1988 and December 1993, at least 87 USO members were murdered.

legendary orator and poet is portrayed clutching a microphone, as he is often remembered. Chacón was a folk hero in Barranca, along the lines of other romantic figures such as Ricardo Lara Parada and Leonardo Posada. The story of his assassination, and the way he is commemorated, tells a great deal about the importance that activists in Barranca give to their shared history. It also reveals a great deal about the shadowy dirty war that was being waged in Barranca at the time.

Manuel Gustavo Chacón Sarmiento, a young and charismatic leader of the *Unión Sindical Obrera* oil workers union, was gunned down in broad daylight on January 15, 1988 on one of the busiest corners in central Barranca. It was 9:30 a.m. and Barranca's main commercial strip was abuzz with the comings and goings of cab drivers, families, vendors and students from the nearby *Universidad de la Paz*. More than a union leader, Chacón was a poet and an accomplished musician who came to symbolize the exuberance of Barranca. Chacón's death sent shockwaves through the local popular movement. He was not just a symbol for oil workers, but for the city. Chacón is most fondly remembered as "*el poeta*" or "*el loco*", a larger-than-life character who composed poetry, sang, and inspired confidence in his comrades at Ecopetrol. Chacón was also an important unifying figure around whom many non-union activists rallied. The very publicly orchestrated assassination of this high profile leader sent the message that nobody was safe. The assassins created an atmosphere of insecurity by demonstrating that they could act with impunity in the city's highly controlled commercial centre, just two blocks away from national police and army bases.

Twenty-four years old when he arrived in Barranca from Bogotá in 1977, Manuel Gustavo Chacón was a rugged and dashing rebel with long hair and a Che Guevara beard.

Born and raised in the historic sugar growing centre of Charalá, Santander, Chacón married María Elba Uribe in 1976. Their three children were all born in Barranca. Chacón attended technical college in Barranca and soon took up a position as a machinist with Ecopetrol. He personified in many ways the spirit of the time and place. The nonchalance and confidence with which Manuel Chacón walked the streets of Barranca seemed to show that he did not expect to be targeted. But the once-safe city of Barranca was becoming a lawless hunting ground. Chacón had received multiple death threats and survived two previous assassination attempts.

The day Manuel Chacón was murdered was like any other. And like any other day, Chacón strode energetically through the streets of Barranca, seemingly oblivious to the threat hanging over his head. At about 9:30 a.m. a phone call came through to the main reception at the USO office from a man calling himself Juan, who said he was an Ecopetrol employee in need of Chacón's assistance in clarifying a mix-up with his paycheque. Chacón and fellow USO official Luis Eduardo Galindo Saavedra drove to the *Banco de los Trabajadores* in the city's commercial district to help out. But they could not find Juan anywhere, and the bank staff did not know anything about the case. Chacón did not behave as if there was anything suspicious or amiss. He and Galindo decided that they might as well do their own banking. Galindo waited for Chacón outside the *Banco de Bogotá*. When Chacón was finished, Galindo went into the *Banco Popular* next door. Chacón waited outside talking to a young woman, and Galindo remembers thinking how typical it was for Chacón to stop on the street to chat with people he knew

or who recognized him. About 10 minutes later, as Galindo was finishing his transaction at the teller's window, a woman burst into the bank shouting "they've killed Chacón".⁴⁵

Nobody pursued the assailants, who fled the area in a blue truck. Chacón was quickly rushed to hospital, where he later succumbed to his injuries. No suspects were detained, and no eyewitnesses identified at the scene, in spite of the fact that a crowd had gathered on the sidewalk. Two police were inside the *Banco Popular* at the time, just a few metres from where Chacón was shot.⁴⁶ The two officers testified that they heard shots, but saw nothing.⁴⁷ At about 10:00 a.m. Chacón's wife, María Elisa Uribe, was told her husband had been shot when a neighbour burst into the house with the news. She made her way to the hospital, where her husband was still being treated. Ten minutes later, she was informed he was dead.⁴⁸ Among the personal effects found on the body of Manuel Chacón was a letter dated October 27, 1987 from a man claiming to be a police officer from Santa Rosa de Simití, in the department of Bolívar. The letter claimed that officers of the Colombian navy were involved in a plan to kill the USO leader.

In the hours following Chacón's death, the USO shut down Ecopetrol. The union worked with the *Coordinadora Popular* to organize a *paro cívico* in Barranca. The protest lasted four days, from January 15 to January 18, 1988. A declaration of war on the city's social movements and on the Colombian trade union movement, Chacón's murder did not go unchallenged. Francisco Campos, who would join CREDHOS in

⁴⁵ Declaración de Luis Eduardo Gallindo Saavedra. January 21, 1988 (p.1). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷ Diligencia de Declaración de Agente César Julio Mora. January 16, 1988 (p.2). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁴⁸ Declaración de María Elba (sic) Uribe de Chacón. January 21, 1988. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

1990, recalls the *paro cívico* for Manuel Chacón as a formative event in his life of activism in Barranca:

We all took risks. We were a bit irresponsible. We were still young, but totally convinced of what we were up to, nobody made us do anything, nobody manipulated us. We didn't sleep. We participated in the *paro cívico* from start to finish. We ended up spent, spent. But it was happiness. This was the best training we had as young people. I was educated there, and afterward I went to university, and I got a degree in human rights. But my basic training took place in the street.⁴⁹

Activists like Francisco Campos took to the streets, certain that their cause was just, that the Colombian state was responsible for the violence into which the city was plunging.

Following the death of Chacón, local organizations accused the military and police for their alleged complicity in the crime. Soon after Chacón's death, the paramilitaries leapt to the defence of the Colombian state and establishment. On January 23, 1988 MAS paramilitaries sent a letter to the president of Fedepetrol, Fernando Acuña, threatening him, as well as David Ravelo, Álvaro Solano and Wilson Ferrer, all identified as spokespeople for the *Coordinadora Popular*. In the missive, the MAS wrote that it would not tolerate accusations of responsibility for murder or reprisals against the military, Ecopetrol, the national or municipal governments, or Barranca's business community: "...your life or the life of your family, will be the retribution, if anything unfortunate should happened to the aforementioned entities".⁵⁰

Manuel Gustavo Chacón's death was the first in a terrible series of murders during what would turn out to be the most violent year in the city's history. In 1988 there were

⁴⁹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, September 20, 2005).

⁵⁰ "MAS" letter to Fernando Acuña, January 23, 1988. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

more than 3,000 politically-motivated killings reported at the national level.⁵¹ Of these, more than 400 were carried out in Barranca. Prominent oil workers' union organizer Hamet Consuegra Llorente was shot and killed on May 25, 1988 at approximately 11:00 p.m. while participating in a street protest on one of Barranca's main roads.⁵² The murder of well-known public figures such as Manuel Gustavo Chacón and Hamet Consuegra galvanized *barranqueños*. The loss of such prominent spokespersons for the civic-popular movement ultimately had deleterious effects on the prospects of civic unity and the future of grassroots organizing.

The Massacre at Llana Caliente

The most important battles against paramilitarism were being fought in rural areas. There was a strong connection between the violence taking place in the city and peasant mobilization in the countryside. A number of the killings in Barranca in 1988 occurred around large peasant protests. On May 23, 1988 several participants in a peasant protest were shot and killed by the Colombian army in a rural area on the outskirts of the city. Following the killings, several hundred peasants, including men and women and many children, took refuge inside the national headquarters of the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO). This led immediately to a *paro cívico* in solidarity with the peasants, led by members of the USO. CREDHOS joined *campesino* groups and progressive Catholic priests in documenting and denouncing the spread of paramilitarism across the Magdalena Medio. Indeed, it was during this time that the pattern of

⁵¹ Washington Office on Latin America, WOLA, *Colombia Besieged: Political Violence and State Responsibility* Washington, DC, WOLA, 1989, 33.

⁵² "Prolongan paro cívico," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Barrancabermeja, Santander), May 27, 1988.

paramilitary expansion into new territories became evident, notably into the foothills of the Cordillera Central in Santander. The tensions and the popular outcry against paramilitarism were such that *campesinos* and the military soon found themselves in direct and deadly conflict.

CREDHOS' early work was regional in approach. In its first year CREDHOS carried out activities in Barrancabermeja, as well as in the *municipios* of San Vicente de Chucurí, El Carmen, Bajo Simacota, Sabana de Torres and Puerto Wilches (Santander), Yondó (Antioquia), and San Pablo and Simití (Bolívar).⁵³ CREDHOS' work in rural zones and small towns outside of Barranca mainly consisted of education and research. These activities were organized by regional *promotores*, or human rights advocates affiliated with CREDHOS who lived in these areas. The work of preparing and delivering legal *denuncias* of human rights abuses committed outside of Barranca was carried out by Jorge Gómez Lizarazo and others at CREDHOS' main office. *Denuncias* might be based on testimony collected by regional *promotores*, or by Barranca-based personnel during their periodic visits to violence-affected areas. Other times, recently-displaced peasants living in Barranca and other victims of violence would go to the CREDHOS office in person to register *denuncias*.

The massacre of Llana Caliente is one of the most notorious episodes of the late 1980s dirty war in the Magdalena Medio because it was carried out during a standoff between soldiers and *campesino* protestors and not under the cover of paramilitarism. The way in which the massacre occurred demonstrated the volatility of the situation in the region, and the deep-seated fear of military authorities to which some activists were

⁵³ CREDHOS, Urgent Action (June 28, 1991). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

subject. The Colombian military continued to carry out functions of social control and counterinsurgency in the Magdalena Medio region, including the intimidation of civilian protestors. The Llana Caliente massacre showed the degree to which military personnel were on edge and susceptible to fear. It was nonetheless shocking that a massacre would be carried out in broad daylight, in front of dozens of witnesses.

On Saturday May 29, 1988 soldiers from the Luciano D'Elhuyar Battalion based in San Vicente de Chucurí opened fire on unarmed peasant protestors who had occupied a rural crossroads connecting San Vicente to El Carmen de Chucurí and Barrancabermeja. The *campesinos* were primarily from the immediate region: they had gathered to protest government inaction on promises signed one year earlier at the resolution of the historic *Paro del Nororiente* national peasant protests. Seventeen people, mostly *campesinos*, were killed that afternoon. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Rogelio Corea Campos, was also killed.

The massacre was the tragic culmination of an intense drama that began one week earlier when thousands of peasants from the surrounding region began a march toward the capital of the department of Santander, Bucaramanga, to mark the first anniversary of the *Paro del Nororiente*.⁵⁴ *Campesinos* in the area of San Vicente de Chucurí and El Carmen de Chucurí had spent the year enduring paramilitary incursions, resulting in the displacement of many people to Barranca. A paramilitary base had been established in the rural area of San Juan Bosco de la Verde, located just south of El Carmen de Chucurí, in May of 1981.⁵⁵ According to confessed paramilitary organizer and Colombian army

⁵⁴ "Dice Ángel Tolosa: 'es difícil atajar goles'," *Opción* 2 (July 1988), 19.

⁵⁵ Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz, "Informe de la Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz sobre la situación de violencia que se vive en los

Major Oscar de Jesus Echandía Sánchez, San Juan Bosco de la Verde served as a training base for paramilitaries operating in the *municipio* of Simacota, where the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) had carried out its first military actions in 1964. The San Juan Bosco de la Verde paramilitaries' main area of influence was the Carare-Opón corridor and south toward Puerto Boyacá.⁵⁶ But by 1986 the paramilitaries were also pushing northward into El Carmen and San Vicente, which at the time were still important bases of operations for the ELN. In the five months preceding the massacre at La Llana Caliente, 22 people from the *municipios* of El Carmen and San Vicente were either killed or disappeared in incidents involving military and paramilitary personnel.⁵⁷

On May 22, 1988 hundreds of *campesinos* from the surrounding area rode towards San Vicente from El Carmen in a convoy comprising 140 trucks and buses. They were stopped along the route by soldiers at a spot known as Llana Caliente. Llana Caliente is a small hamlet located at the intersection where roads linking the municipalities of El Carmen, San Vicente and Barranca meet, less than 10 kilometres from San Vicente's town centre. There is nothing much there, except for a couple of small stores and a cluster of houses. A short bridge spans the Opón River as it winds down through the rocky hills of Santander, meeting up with the Magdalena River just south of Barranca. It is a narrow unpaved road, with lots of tree cover and steep sloping sides. Completed in 1932, it was until the end of the 1980s the only land route connecting Barranca to the interior of the department of Santander.

municipios de El Carmen y San Vicente de Chucurí (Santander), debida a la acción de grupos paramilitares” (Bogotá: August 1990), 5.

⁵⁶ Giraldo, *The Genocidal Democracy*, 96.

⁵⁷ Liga Internacional por los Derechos y la Liberación de los Pueblos, *El camino de la niebla* vol. 2 (Bogotá: Liga Internacional por los Derechos y la Liberación de los Pueblos, Sección Colombiana, 1990), 291.

The standoff between the army and the *campesinos* was long and tense. By Monday, May 31 there were an estimated 9,500 *campesinos* backed up along the road to Llana Caliente. They stretched out in a line hundreds of metres long, with tents and make-shift shelters. Food and water were in very short supply. On the third day tensions boiled over, a few people shouted, and soldiers fired warning shots into the air. Finally, after a six day war of nerves, the stalemate was broken. A commission of representatives from the departmental government arrived at the site and requested of the army that the *campesinos* be allowed to send a delegation to Bucaramanga to discuss their demands. On the morning of May 29, a small group of *campesino* leaders left for Bucaramanga.

The brigade commander Lieutenant Colonel Rogelio Corea was celebrating his 45th birthday over lunch, accompanied by the mayor of San Vicente and three other municipal officials. Some have suggested that Corea was drunk by midday. Whatever the case, witnesses reported that the Lieutenant Colonel was angry as he made his way to the barricades separating the soldiers from the *campesino* marchers. He had been informed that the marchers demanded to see him, that they were accusing the army of having detained four *campesinos*. As he approached the barricades, he warned the protestors on the other side not to try and cross over. One man attempted to remove some tree branches that had been leaned up against the barricades. Corea gave the order to open fire. But at first nothing happened. Corea shot and killed soldier Luis Suarez Acevedo, who refused to carry out the order. Former FARC guerrilla turned army informant known as “Comandante Camilo” then turned and fired on Corea. Comandante Camilo was then struck by a flurry of gunfire. According to an eyewitness, soldiers then

began firing at will on the *campesinos*.⁵⁸ They shot at the crowd gathered in front of the barricade and then from various angles at people hiding in trees along the roadside and by the banks of the river. Four soldiers died, including Lieutenant Colonel Corea. Eight *campesinos* were declared dead at the scene, and 27 were taken to hospital. Other reports released in subsequent years put the number of dead at 13. *Campesino* groups claimed the number of dead to be 38.

The significance of the massacre at La Llana Caliente for human rights activists in Barrancabermeja and the wider Magdalena Medio was immediate. In the first instance, it demonstrated that the mechanisms of legal impunity in Colombia would shield the army from meaningful prosecution in even the most blatant of human rights atrocities. There were many irregularities in the way the investigation proceeded, including the failure to recover evidence at the site.⁵⁹ Secondly, the massacre sent a strong dissuasive message to *campesinos* in the Magdalena Medio to refrain from protesting in the future. The Llana Caliente massacre reinforced the defensive mentality gripping Barranca's popular movements, all the more so as *campesino* families fleeing the San Vicente countryside began to arrive in increasingly large numbers in Barranca.⁶⁰

During the second week in June 1988 the bodies of nine murder victims were recovered from the streets of the city. In response, the police stepped up armoured patrols in Barranca's poor neighbourhoods. And for the following three weeks things remained relatively calm. On October 23, 1988 a police station was opened along the main road in the *Primero de Mayo* neighbourhood, and construction began on a new

⁵⁸ "La balacera duró hora y media," *Colombia Hoy* 9:58 (1988), 27.

⁵⁹ Liga Internacional por los Derechos, *El camino de la niebla*, 278.

⁶⁰ Justicia y Paz, "Informe de la comisión intercongregacional", 32

central police base, built inside a fortified compound adjacent to the city's largest power station. The violence continued. In mid-November there were 14 more murders, including the massacre of six men along a highway on the outskirts of town.⁶¹

CREDHOS took exception to the militarization of the city and publicly called upon the national police to protect the local population, instead of treating civilians like enemy combatants. In a report published in November 1989, summarizing all of the most important cases of the previous two-year period, CREDHOS wrote that the death of Manuel Gustavo Chacón had been “perpetrated by members of the state security forces”.⁶² Jorge Gómez Lizarazo regularly attended municipal council meetings, where he made statements denouncing the detention of civilians at the army base in Barranca, physical abuse of suspects at the hands of the military, and the denial of legal council to detainees.⁶³ The municipal council discussed human rights concerns regularly through 1987 and 1988. For the first time in the city's history, human rights were displacing social services and infrastructure from local lawmakers' agendas.

Catching Up with the Guerrillas

Recognized by Washington, D.C.-based organizations for their knowledge of the links between the Colombian military and the paramilitary, CREDHOS spokespeople

⁶¹ National Police Commander Major Guillermo Vélez Botero. Barrancabermeja Municipal Council Minutes. No.042 (November 22, 1988). Barrancabermeja Municipal Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁶² Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, “Barrancabermeja y la impunidad en los delitos de lesa humanidad,” (Barrancabermeja: November 1989), 24. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁶³ CREDHOS president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo. Barrancabermeja Municipal Council Minutes. No.042 (November 22, 1988). Barrancabermeja Municipal Archives, Barrancabermeja.

would soon find themselves immersed in debates around the U.S.-funded “war on drugs” in Colombia . A well-known area of investment in land and cattle ranching for narco-traffickers based in Medellín and Cali, the Magdalena Medio was one of the most violent areas of the country. The main task of U.S. human rights groups was to demonstrate that the Colombian military was not entitled to receive aid from the U.S. government because of their links to paramilitaries and human rights atrocities. But the momentum behind military cooperation between Colombia and the U.S. was too strong. Indeed, the U.S. government was convinced that Marxist guerrillas were getting the upper hand and needed to be stopped. In a cable sent to the U.S. Secretary of State on 22 February 1988, officials at the U.S. embassy in Bogotá describe the Colombian counterinsurgency war as a shambles: “Meanwhile the armed forces [are] stuck in a reactive mode... playing catch-up with the guerrillas. Their response has been piecemeal, reflecting the absence of a national strategy or framework. ...a sustained military response has proven elusive”.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, United States lawmakers were not yet prepared to commit to an open counterinsurgency war. In 1988 Colombia received \$14.1 million in U.S. military aid. In 1989 the figure increased to \$86 million.⁶⁵

Amidst the military build-up, social movements and guerrilla groups were readily conflated. An activist priest who helped lead the civic-popular movement in Barrancabermeja in the 1980s recalls:

Many of the dead were the real social leaders... the social leadership of the Magdalena Medio was being bled by the war. So social organizations had to learn, not to retreat but to renovate, to reform... what occurred was a scorched

⁶⁴ Memorandum. United States Embassy, “Government Responds to Continued Guerrilla Violence”, Bogotá, February 22, 1988. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

⁶⁵ WOLA, *Colombia Besieged*, 109

earth campaign, through massacres and the strategy of selective assassinations. Here they did not come looking for the guerrilla commander, they came looking for social leaders.⁶⁶

In a June 5, 1988 article published in the national Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, Barranca is described as an “enclave under siege” and controlled by the guerrillas.⁶⁷ In response, activist priest and new director of the *Pastoral Social*, Nel Beltrán, declared “Barranca... is not a guerrilla centre... it is not the same to endure the presence of a particular group and to be identified with it”.⁶⁸

Apart from the military and Ecopetrol, the diocese of Barrancabermeja was the only major institution that bound the Magdalena Medio region together. Not surprisingly, the Bishop of Barranca was one of the individuals with the broadest knowledge of developments in both countryside and city.⁶⁹ In a public statement signed October 6, 1988, Bishop Juan Francisco Sarasti described the mood in Barranca:

Yesterday a member of our community in Barrancabermeja was assassinated; at noon another fell; last Saturday a third; last Wednesday, another. Day after day after day in a horrible bloodbath... sometimes in central streets, but also in the outlying neighbourhoods. Sometimes hidden by shadows, many times in broad daylight. ...it used to be mostly in the countryside, and we stayed silent. Today it is the city that is under siege, and we do not want to be accessories to tragedy.⁷⁰

The social bases of CREDHOS were under siege. Was the threat to the city’s social movements mortal? Could CREDHOS continue to work and stay relevant and influential, in spite of these challenging circumstances?

⁶⁶ Anonymous interview (Bogotá 2004). CINEP archives.

⁶⁷ Torres, *Barrancabermeja en textos e imágenes*, 90.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ When Bishop Sarasti left Barranca in 1993 to assume the post of Archbishop of Ibagué, in the department of Tolima, after 10 years of service, *barranqueños* lauded his legacy. Communists, oil workers, journalists, Ecopetrol executives and the departmental government in Bucaramanga all pointed to Sarasti’s commitment to peace and social justice as exemplary. *Familia Diocesana* 41 (June 1993), 13-19.

⁷⁰ *Familia Diocesana* 22 (August 1988), 4.

Conclusions: Plotting a Course for Human Rights

CREDHOS set out to establish a non-partisan basis upon which to advocate for human rights. Buoyed by the wave of mass protests against political violence that took place in Barranca in 1987 and 1988, it rallied the city's civic-popular movement and set out an agenda for human rights protection that included a strong social justice component. Like the *campesino* protestors who had come before it, CREDHOS linked the human rights crisis in the Magdalena Medio to chronic poverty and underdevelopment. It was a moment of extraordinary synergies. Yet the challenges facing the burgeoning human rights movement were intractable. Selective assassinations continued in the countryside and paramilitary forces closed in on the city from the south. Under tremendous pressure, longstanding social and political differences began to test the unity of the civic-popular movement. By the end of 1988 there was very little breathing room indeed, and CREDHOS was about to face its greatest challenge yet.

Chapter 7

War Declared on Human Rights Defenders

We thought we were immune. We were racing with death. We were constantly clashing with the security forces. Because we had so much support. But we underestimated them. We didn't think they would kill us.⁷⁰⁹

Jael Quiroga, human rights activist

Introduction: Local Interpretations of Colombian Conflict

On March 1, 1992 the *New York Times* declared: “Violence Takes Over a Colombian City”. Written in response to the killing of CREDHOS secretary Blanca Cecilia Valero de Durán, the article highlighted the uniqueness of Barrancabermeja in the early 1990s. Through the first two months of 1992 there had been an average of 10 murders per week in the city.⁷¹⁰ That represented a 33 per cent increase from the previous year, and a rate several times the national average. Barranca was described by the *New York Times* as a gritty industrial city with a long history of left-wing political organizing and armed insurgency. The article pointed out that all of Colombia's major armed actors are present in the city of Barranca, with one notable exception. Drug traffickers, the articles stated, are simply not a major presence in Barranca. This was no small detail in the heyday of drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, then the world's most famous fugitive. Compared to Barranca, the difference between political violence and organized criminal activity would be much harder for foreign observers to discern in large cities such as Medellín or Cali, or in rural areas where narco dollars were being poured into

⁷⁰⁹ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

⁷¹⁰ “Violence Takes Over a Colombian City,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1987.

cattle ranching, emerald mining, and other nominally legitimate enterprises.⁷¹¹ The *New York Times* observed that Barranca's large poor population, especially peasants displaced to the city from the countryside by political violence, had been "denied the economic benefits" of oil.⁷¹² Bitterness towards the state, the article continued, was strengthening the hand of Marxist guerrillas in Barranca and across Colombia.

CREDHOS opened a unique window on political violence in Colombia.

CREDHOS documented and interpreted the activities of state security forces, and the relationships between these and paramilitary groups. The human rights organization's regularly-published newsletters, press releases and annual reports constituted a thorough public explanation of violence in the Magdalena Medio. Their correspondence with local and national and government authorities presented oftentimes painfully detailed accounts of specific cases of death threats, intimidation and attacks on the civilian population. CREDHOS also provided legal support to victims and their families, and occasionally sent members to Bogotá, the United States and Europe to ask elected officials and civil society groups to publicly denounce military and paramilitary violence.⁷¹³ Local unions and social movements contributed to the process of documentation and denunciation as well.⁷¹⁴ The Bogotá-based NGO Justice and Peace also pioneered human rights

⁷¹¹ María Victoria Uribe, *Limpiar la tierra: guerra y poder entre esmeralderos* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP, 1992).

⁷¹² "Violence Takes Over a Colombian City," *New York Times*, March 1, 1987.

⁷¹³ Jael Quiroga toured the United States in 1991, speaking mainly to activist groups and university students, co-sponsored by the Colombia Human Rights Committee and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), both coalitions of civil society, religious leaders and other social activists. Washington Office on Latin America, "WOLA Round-Up", *Update Latin America*, 16:1-2 (1991).

⁷¹⁴ There are several reports published by the National Peasant Association (ANUC) throughout the 1980s that discuss issues of political violence. The first ANUC reports to explicitly look at violence from a human rights perspective, employing terms such as

monitoring work in the Magdalena Medio, notably by undertaking field research and maintaining contact with progressive priests living in paramilitary-controlled areas.⁷¹⁵

The internationally-renowned Colombian Office of Andean Commission of Jurists (now the Colombian Commission of Jurists) also carried out research in the region.⁷¹⁶

The scrutiny of human rights activists in the Magdalena Medio represented an impediment to the counterinsurgency goals of the central government. CREDHOS and other activist groups thus gave lie to the commonly-held international views that the Colombian conflict was mainly about drugs or too complex to understand. During a 24-hour visit to Bogotá on May 24, 1988, U.S. congressman John P. Murtha and U.S. Army Secretary John O. Marsh met privately with Colombian President Virgilio Barco.⁷¹⁷ President Barco agreed with his guests that on his upcoming visit to Washington, D.C. he should refrain from offering U.S. lawmakers a nuanced analysis of the Colombia's armed conflict, "half jokingly noting that even he is not sure he fully understands the long history of guerrilla related violence in Colombia".⁷¹⁸ In preparation for the trip to Washington, the U.S. ambassador in Bogotá assured State Department officials that he

impunity and dirty war, appeared later in the decade. See Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos, "El avance de la guerra sucia en Colombia: el caso del Magdalena Medio" (Barrancabermeja: 1988). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷¹⁵ Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz, *Informe de la Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz sobre la Situación de Violencia que se vive en los Municipios de El Carmen y San Vicente de Chucurí (Santander), Debida a la Acción de Grupos Paramilitares* (Bogotá: August 1990).

⁷¹⁶ Comisión Andina de Juristas, Seccional Colombiana, *Nordeste Antioqueño y Magdalena Medio Serie Informes Regionales de Derechos Humanos* (Bogotá: Códice Ltda., 1993).

⁷¹⁷ They were accompanied by a congressional Appropriations Committee staffer, one U.S. army General and two Lieutenant-Colonels.

⁷¹⁸ Memorandum. United States Embassy, Bogotá. "Murtha and Marsh Visit Concentrates on Narco Power and Insurgency", Bogotá: 24 May 1988. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

would “send [President Barco] the Embassy’s analysis of the connections between the insurgency and the [drug] traffickers”.⁷¹⁹

The war against human rights activists in Barrancabermeja in the late 1980s and early 1990s is central to interpretations of the Colombian conflict, the role of the state, the role of paramilitary forces, and relations among them. In the late 1980s in Barranca there emerged a model of paramilitarism that can best be described as a form of clandestine counterinsurgency, run in direct collaboration with, and oftentimes with the direct participation of, members of the Colombian armed forces and national police. The Colombian military hired assassins, or *sicarios*, who dressed in civilian clothes, travelled by motorcycle, and carried out surgical strikes in broad daylight. These were not the paramilitaries of the rural Magdalena Medio, who worked in larger groups, carried high-powered automatic weapons, wore uniforms, and travelled by truck, car or boat. The *sicariato* phenomenon is best known, and most mythologized, in the case of Medellín, where young gunmen for hire with no political allegiances and little training are contracted by drug lords or private paramilitary groups for shockingly small sums of money.⁷²⁰ Barranca’s *sicarios* were, by contrast, professionals recruited directly by Colombian security forces.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

⁷²⁰ There is a significant literature on the *sicarios* of Medellín that runs the gamut from serious academic inquiry, to human rights reports, poetry, film, music and novels. Some of the best known examples include Alonso Salazar’s ethnography of violence *No nacimos pa’ semilla* (1990), novels by Fernando Vallejo *La vírgen de los sicarios* (1994) and Jorge Franco Ramos *Rosario Tijeras* (1999), and Víctor Gaviria’s cinéma vérité film “Rodrigo D: no futuro” (2005). Path-breaking academic work on violence in Medellín has been done by anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, *Dwellers of Memory: Youth and Violence in Medellín, Colombia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006). See also recent groundbreaking research into the emergence of a model of enforced protection, or protection racketeering, by organized criminal groups in an urban setting

The war on CREDHOS from 1989 to 1992 was part of a widespread pattern of attacks against social activists in Barranca. Yet in spite of the escalating repression and violence surrounding them, CREDHOS members did not initially suspect that they themselves were in grave danger. As CREDHOS' first president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo says: "...the situation was quite complicated, and in a way it went way beyond our capacity to respond".⁷²¹ In 1991 CREDHOS counted hundreds of murders in the city for which no armed group had claimed responsibility, and noted the increasingly frequent appearance of mutilated and unidentified victims.⁷²² Amongst the victims of this wave of violence were trade union activists, community leaders, journalists, left-wing political activists, and social movement leaders. Between 1989 and 1992 six CREDHOS staff members were killed. In 1993 five key CREDHOS representatives, including Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, were forced to flee Colombia.

This was a decisive time in Colombian history, characterized by great promise and even greater peril. Barranca was one of the most fiercely disputed urban areas in the country, due to the militancy of the city's labour and social movements, and the increase in urban guerrilla activity as of the mid 1980s. By 1991 the Cold War was officially over. Also, the first comprehensive political reforms in Colombia in more than 100 years were being carried out. A progressive new constitution was drafted and approved in

by the former director of the human rights research institute *Instituto Popular de Capacitación* (IPC) in Medellín. See John J. Bedoya, *La protección violenta en Colombia: el caso de Medellín desde los 90s* (Medellín: IPC-Confiar, 2010) and John J. Bedoya, "Seguridad y ciudadanía en los 90 en Medellín: el surgimiento de las empresas colombianas de protección violenta", *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 31:62 (2006), 87-130.

⁷²¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006)

⁷²² Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, *Boletín* (August-September, 1991). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

1991 through an imperfect, yet promising consensus-building exercise that involved civil society groups and demobilized guerrillas. The Colombian Constitution of 1991 recognized human rights, including those of aboriginal and African-Colombian peoples, and strengthened judicial independence.⁷²³ It also created new mechanisms such as the *Defensoría del Pueblo* (Human Rights Ombudsman) and the *Fiscalía General* (Attorney General) to monitor, promote and enforce human rights law.⁷²⁴

As of the end of the 1980s and the early years of the 1990s, a war was being waged on multiple fronts between the state, paramilitary forces, drug lords and Marxist guerrillas. Paramilitary and guerrilla proliferation varied from region to region. By 1993 the major players in Colombia's armed conflict were expanding their influence, fuelled by lucrative protection rackets, the taxation of the illegal drug trade, contraband, and kidnapping.⁷²⁵ The dirty war in Barrancabermeja in the late 1980s marked both the culmination of a long period of social conflict and the onset of a far deeper crisis. As violence increased across Colombia, a new generation of Colombian social activists were expressing themselves using the language of human rights. In short, the basic modalities and discourse of Colombia's current social and political conflict were taking shape.

The Barranca Model of Paramilitarism

The history of Barranca provides clear insight into the parallel rise of paramilitarism and human rights activism, and how these forces influenced one another.

⁷²³ Donna Lee Van Cott, *The Friendly Liquidation of the Past: The Politics of Diversity in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Ana María Bejarano, "Perverse Democratization: Pacts, Institutions and Problematic Consolidations in Colombia and Venezuela," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000).

⁷²⁴ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 226.

⁷²⁵ Richani, *Systems of Violence*.

The fact that Barranca had a relatively strong state presence, including military and civilian agencies, made human rights activism feasible. Human rights violations in Barranca could be observed and tallied, unlike abuses taking place in remote rural areas. Poor transportation links and communications, coupled with the threat of violence and the weakness of local civil authorities, made human rights violations in the countryside very difficult to investigate. CREDHOS and other civil society groups monitored incidents of political violence and relayed reports directly to the local representatives of national government agencies responsible for the oversight of human rights, including the Barranca office of the Inspector General (*Procuraduría*). Following the approval of the 1991 Constitution, Barranca would become the regional headquarters for the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (*Defensoría del Pueblo*) and the Attorney General (*Fiscalía*). Barranca also benefited from a large presence of news media, including two local weekly newspapers, *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio* and *El Sideral*, and a handful of radio stations. The daily *Vanguardia Liberal* newspaper, published out of Bucaramanga, published a daily supplement on the Magdalena Medio.

A number of prominent historians and social scientists have written about paramilitarism in the Magdalena Medio region.⁷²⁶ These studies – which explore the complex relationships between the state, armed forces, paramilitary groups, guerrillas, social movements, drug traffickers, landowners, and leftwing political parties – were made possible by the work of local human rights activists. In no other region of Colombia was frontline human rights work of this kind being done on a permanent basis.

⁷²⁶ See Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*; Romero, *Paramilitares y autodefensas: 1982-2003*; Vargas, *Magdalena Medio Santandereano*; Richani, *Systems of Violence*.

The reporting carried out by CREDHOS, *Justicia y Paz*, the *Unión Sindical Obrera*, the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* and the *Organización Femenina Popular*, to cite just a few examples, has been hugely influential. CREDHOS and other groups working out of Barranca provided first-hand evidence and analysis that would inspire a fierce debate amongst activists, policy-makers and academics concerning state-paramilitary collusion.⁷²⁷

Barranca is a case study in the direct collusion between paramilitaries and state security forces. Beginning in the early 1980s in the southern Magdalena Medio in the *municipios* of Puerto Boyacá and Puerto Berrío, paramilitary groups enjoyed the cooperation of the Colombian military. The same basic patterns were repeated during the expansion of paramilitary groups north into the mountainous areas of Santander from San Juan del Bosco in the mid-1980s. Paramilitary-style actions carried out within the city itself required the direct support of state security forces, namely the army, navy and national police.⁷²⁸ The absence of major drug trafficking organizations in the city meant that there was no criminal network to support counterinsurgency efforts and the violent persecution of social activists, as was the case in the city of Medellín during the 1990s.

⁷²⁷ In recent years a political scandal commonly referred to as the “*parapolítica*” scandal has rocked Colombia, based on revelations that leading members of the Colombian Congress and the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez are involved directly in the financing and organizing of right-wing paramilitary groups. This has inspired a flurry of academic enquiry into the relationship between political power and paramilitary networks. See Jasmin Hristov, *Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, Swallow Press, 2009); Mauricio Romero, ed., *Parapolítica: la ruta de la expansión paramilitar y los acuerdos políticos* (Bogotá: Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, 2007). For a human rights perspective, see Human Rights Watch, *Breaking the Grip? Obstacles to Justice for Paramilitary Mafias in Colombia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008).

⁷²⁸ Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, “Sobre la situación de los Derechos Humanos en el Magdalena Medio” (Barranca: CREDHOS, March 13, 1992). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

Because of its history as a foreign-owned enclave, Barranca had no significant bourgeoisie that could have provided resources to paramilitary groups. Interviewed at her office in a busy elementary school in Barrio María Eugenia in Barranca's southeast district, CREDHOS founding member and long-time *Pastoral Social* activist Irene Villamizar asked: "Who are the rich people in Barranca? The Ecopetrol workers? It has to be them because they have jobs, and stability and all of that, but they are not rich. There are no great social differences here."⁷²⁹

By 1992 Barranca had become one of the most militarized urban areas anywhere in the world, measured in terms of the sheer number of military, police and illegal armed troops in the city.⁷³⁰ The city served as a regional base of operations for two army battalions, naval and national police forces, as well as three guerrilla groups.⁷³¹ Barranca had long been subject to high levels of direct involvement in local affairs by national government institutions, the army, navy, police intelligence and other branches of the national security apparatus. This was true even prior to the "reversion" of Tropical Oil Company holdings to public ownership in 1961. The Colombian government's imperative to exercise direct control over the city only increased significantly in the late 1980s when the ELN guerrillas established urban militia within the city.

⁷²⁹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

⁷³⁰ Definitions of militarization generally take into account two main variables: the size of the military, and the "political influence and prerogatives" of the military. The number of troops per capita and the level of encroachment of the military into civilian functions of the state therefore become the measures of militarization. See Kirk S. Bowman, *Militarization, Democracy, and Development: The Perils of Praetorianism in Latin America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 20.

⁷³¹ The *Batallón de Artillería y defensa antiaérea Número 02 "Nueva Granada"*, *Batallón Contraguerrilla 45 "Héroes de Majagual"*, National Police, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), and *Ejército de Liberación Popular* (EPL).

Events in Barranca reflected contradictory national trends towards greater militarization, on the one hand, and formal recognition of human rights, on the other. During the 1980s the political clout of the Colombian armed forces was enhanced by the expansion of counterinsurgency operations and the influx of U.S. counter-narcotics assistance.⁷³² At the same time, the Colombian Supreme Court struck down the law that permitted civilians to be tried by military courts. The Supreme Court also stipulated that soldiers who committed crimes “outside of military service” be tried by civilian courts.⁷³³ The process of militarization came to a climax with U.S. congressional approval of President George H. W. Bush’s “Andean Regional Initiative” in 1989, which included hundreds of millions of dollars in military assistance for Colombia.⁷³⁴ In the midst of the military build-up, Colombian President Virgilio Barco showed signs of sensitivity to human rights concerns. In 1989 he signed Decree 815 formally banning the formation of “self-defense” or paramilitary groups. President Barco also created a government task force to combat paramilitaries, formally designated the “Advisory and coordinating commission of actions against death squads, gangs of assassins or self-defence or private justice groups, inaccurately referred to as paramilitaries”.⁷³⁵ Meanwhile, in 1990 the Colombian army created its first mobile brigades for counter-insurgency purposes, two of which were deployed to the Magdalena Medio.⁷³⁶

⁷³² Leal, *La seguridad nacional a la deriva*, 41.

⁷³³ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁴ Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: U.S. Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner Publishers, INC., 2002), 35.

⁷³⁵ In 1992 the commission was fused with the National Security Council, over which the President of Colombia presides. Departamento Administrativo de la Presidencia de la República. Decreto 2134 DE 1992, (Diciembre 30) *Diario Oficial* No 40.703. December 31, 1992.

⁷³⁶ Archila, et al, *Conflicto, poderes e identidades*, 333

There exists in Colombia a fierce polemic between those who view the paramilitaries as a clandestine arm of the state counterinsurgency apparatus and those who view them as independent actors who share the same counterinsurgency orientation as official state security forces. As has been documented by sociologist Mauricio Romero, in regions of Colombia where the state is less present and drug trafficking networks are stronger, paramilitary groups developed some of the characteristics of semi-independent armed actors, from the construction of training bases to the development of major commercial ventures.⁷³⁷ One Barranca-based activist Catholic priest describes a very different situation:

In the 1980s I think that... the state and its security forces were in charge of what we would call a “dirty war”. We all know about the death of Manuel Gustavo Chacón... it was carried out by the famous navy “clan”, and we know that naval officials went around pretending to be paramilitaries, what they used to call the “*masetos*”, members of MAS, to annihilate union and social leaders. The UP [Patriotic Union] was hit hard in Barrancabermeja, in the Magdalena Medio, directly by the official security forces, whatever you want to call them... *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad* [DAS], *Policía Judicial* [SIJIN], navy, army, police, etc. To the degree that they went ahead with this fight, the para-state forces grew closer and closer to the state, and behaved more cynically and brazenly. In the Magdalena Medio the people can provide testimony of mixed patrols where the paramilitaries go around with state agents; the people have seen soldiers get down from their vehicles and forget to take off their [paramilitary] armbands.⁷³⁸

In Barrancabermeja itself, paramilitary actions were often carried out directly by members of the Colombian military, or *sicarios* hired by the military. In the Magdalena Medio, there is a tremendous amount of anecdotal evidence of mixed military-paramilitary patrols; paramilitary roadblocks set up five minutes’ drive from army bases;

⁷³⁷ The military is said to have provided “subtle backing” to paramilitaries against leftist guerrillas in the department of Córdoba in the 1990s. Romero, “Changing Identities,” 52.

⁷³⁸ Anonymous interview (Barrancabermeja 2004). CINEP Archives.

soldiers seen one day in regular army uniform and in paramilitary uniform later the same day; and paramilitary troops passing unheeded by army bases.

War on Human Rights: The Massacre at La Rochela

Thanks to the work undertaken by Colombian human rights activists, we can identify the ways in which national and regional political and economic dynamics impacted individual communities. During the 1989-1993 period, a number of important incidents and developments in Barranca and the Magdalena Medio announced the intention of paramilitaries and the Colombian armed forces to discourage human rights and other social activism from being carried out in the region. Some of these cases had an enormous impact in terms of clarifying the role of the state, the role of private and paramilitary armed forces, and relations among them. The January 1989 massacre at La Rochela, discussed at the beginning of this dissertation, was the subject of a legal process led by Colombian human rights lawyers that lasted 17 years, during which time thousands of pages of documents and testimony were collected.⁷³⁹ La Rochela is of critical importance in terms of historical interpretations of the Colombian conflict, particularly the impact of paramilitarism on the Magdalena Medio region and on human rights activists in Barranca.

The massacre of 12 members of a government judicial commission at La Rochela on January 18, 1989 was the first major incident in the war against human rights

⁷³⁹ On 11 May 2007, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held the Colombian state responsible for the La Rochela massacre.

defenders in the Magdalena Medio.⁷⁴⁰ La Rochela was an elaborately orchestrated attempt to obstruct the pursuit of justice in cases of atrocities committed by joint military-paramilitary operations. Understanding the circumstances surrounding the massacre, and the way in which the massacre itself was carried out, can provide us with important insights into the impact of paramilitary crimes, both on the victims and on the Colombian justice system. In the wake of La Rochela, human rights activists in the Magdalena Medio region knew that they would have to yield to paramilitary pressure or else carry out their work without a safety net.

In response to the disappearance of 19 travelling merchants on October 3, of 1987 just south of Barranca, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights of the Organization of American States ordered the Colombian government to undertake an investigation into paramilitary organizing in the Magdalena Medio.⁷⁴¹ In December 1988 a commission was created by the *Dirección de Instrucción Criminal* (DIJIN), the investigative branch of the National Police, to look into paramilitary crimes in the rural *municipios* of Bajo Simacota, Puerto Parra and Cimitarra in the department of Santander and Puerto Boyacá in the department of Boyacá. It was the first time in Colombian history that the state had responded so quickly and decisively to an Inter-American Court judgment, signalling a potential breakthrough in terms of the effectiveness of the justice system. The

⁷⁴⁰ Those murdered at La Rochela include: Mariela Morales Caro, Pablo Antonio Beltrán Palomino, Virgilio Hernández Serrano, Carlos Fernando Castillo Zapata, Luis Orlando Hernández Muñoz, Yul Germán Monroy Ramírez, Gabriel Enrique Vesga Fonseca, Benhur Iván Guasca Castro, Orlando Morales Cárdenas, César Augusto Morales Cepeda, Arnulfo Mejía Duarte y Samuel Vargas Páez.

⁷⁴¹ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Case of the 19 Merchants v. Colombia. Preliminary Objection. Judgment of June 12, 2002. Series C No. 93. CEJIL Archives, Washington, DC.

commission's job would be to interview public officials and local residents about the activities of paramilitary groups and report back to the Inspector General's office.

The commission's work was troubled from the outset. The first judge assigned to coordinate the investigation, Camilo Navarro Velásquez from Bucaramanga, received death threats and quit.⁷⁴² By the end of December 1988, Bucaramanga-based judges Mariela Morales and Pablo Beltrán Palomino were fed up with what they felt to be the non-cooperation of Colombian army commanders in the region.⁷⁴³ So they made plans to undertake a brief visit to the Magdalena Medio to gather evidence *in situ*. Apprehensive that the army might try to intimidate potential witnesses or otherwise hinder their work, the commissioners decided to proceed without notifying the Fourteenth Brigade in Puerto Berrío or the Second Division in Bucaramanga. They drove from Bucaramanga to Barrancabermeja on January 14. Over the next three days they collected testimonies in Barranca, in the nearby *municipio* of Puerto Parra, and made two brief reconnaissance trips to La Rochela.⁷⁴⁴ The evening of January 17, the night before she was killed, judge Mariela Morales called her husband to tell him that she felt nervous.⁷⁴⁵

The 15-person commission consisting of judges, lawyers and other investigative staff, set out for La Rochela from Barranca at 7:00 a.m. on January 18, 1989.⁷⁴⁶ Arriving in the town of La Rochela just before 8:00 a.m., commission members proceeded to set

⁷⁴² Liga Internacional, *El camino de la niebla*, 386.

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁴ The Police Inspector is a civilian municipal official who fulfils the basic duties of a regular police officer in smaller communities where there is no national police presence.

⁷⁴⁵ Liga Internacional, *El camino de la niebla* vol. 2, 387.

⁷⁴⁶ The commission was headed by two judges assigned to the *municipio* of San Gil, located near the city of Bucaramanga. The other commissioners included judicial and police investigators from San Gil, Bucaramanga and Barrancabermeja. Inter-American Court of Human Rights. "Case of the Rochela Massacre v. Colombia Judgment of May 11, 2007 (Merits, Reparations, and Costs)," p.22.

up a temporary office inside the town police post and began taking testimony. But few local residents came forward to speak. Three members of the commission, accompanied by the local Police Inspector, then decided to go to the neighbouring village of Pueblo Nuevo to locate several other individuals they hoped would be willing to talk. They were stopped en route by a group of armed, uniformed men claiming to be members of the 23rd Front of the FARC. The group's commander identified himself as "Comandante Ernesto". He was affable, pledged to cooperate in any way possible, and let them pass.

Soon afterwards, a group of about 40 armed men entered La Rochela and presented themselves to the commission as members of the FARC. Unbeknownst to the commissioners, this was turning into a gathering of some of the most important paramilitary commanders in Colombia. Within an hour a large SUV arrived and several heavily-armed men got out. One of them was Alfonso de Jesús Baquero, alias "el negro Vladimir", one of the most notorious paramilitary commanders in Colombian history. He was not recognized by the members of the commission, but something about his appearance was unsettling to them. He seemed too well dressed and was wearing too much jewellery to be a FARC commander. It was now nearly noon, and the heat of midday was beginning to wear on everybody. One of the alleged FARC commanders announced that an army truck had been spotted on the road and that the commission would have to leave the area. They took the members of the commission inside the police station and tied their hands behind their backs, explaining that they needed to pretend that the commission had been taken hostage in case they ran into authorities. The commission members were then loaded back into their vehicles and driven out of town,

heading north on the Pan-American Highway. About five minutes into the journey the convoy came to a stop.

The first shot was fired, followed by a volley, and then an all-out hail of bullets. The shooting lasted for nearly ten minutes. Twelve men and women were killed. Three men – Arturo Salgado Garzón, Manuel Libardo Díaz Navas and Wilson Humberto Mantilla – survived by pretending to be dead. Díaz Navas was shot several times, dragged from the truck and left face down on the road without the assailants noticing he was holding his breath. Several of the assailants spray-painted “*Fuera el MAS – Fuera Paramilitares*” [MAS out – Paramilitaries out] on the trucks. Arturo, Manuel and Wilson waited in silence until they were certain that the armed group had left the area. They then found the keys in the ignition of one of the trucks and headed towards Barranca. But the truck quickly broke down, and they had to wait for help to come by. Arturo Salgado, the most seriously injured of the three, could not be moved. Manuel and Wilson waded ahead and flagged down a passing tractor-trailer. They were taken to an army post, where they asked for assistance. Arturo was picked up several hours later, still alive.

In February 1989 government investigators from Barranca, Bucaramanga and Bogotá confirmed that the perpetrators of the massacre had indeed been paramilitaries and not FARC guerrillas. It is now known that the massacre was carried out by paramilitaries under the command of Julio Rivera, also known as Julián Jaimes or “Comandante Ernesto”, assisted by Alfonso de Jesús Baquero, alias “el negro Vladimir”. Julián Jaimes was a former military policeman, originally from Barranca. Baquero was a former member of the FARC. Both men were well known to local army commanders. Another former FARC commander, Ramón Isaza Arango, also helped plan the massacre.

Arrest warrants were issued for Julián Jaimes, Alfonso de Jesús Baquero, and 15 other presumed paramilitaries. Nine were captured, including the two alleged masterminds. However, due to death threats against the judges responsible for the investigation, the trial was moved to a court in the faraway city of Pasto, in the department of Nariño.⁷⁴⁷ On June 29, 1990 Jaimes and Baquero were found guilty of aggravated homicide and sentenced to 30 years in prison. Another 11 individuals were sentenced to between 5 and 30 years. Leniency and impunity were all but assured for the majority of the accused. Even as the first sentences were handed out, a reversal was being engineered. On November 14, 1990 the *Tribunal Superior de Orden Público* in Bogotá modified or dropped the charges and sentences. Three of the civilian cases were thrown out altogether, Sergeant Hernández' sentence was reduced to one year, and Lieutenant Andrade's case was remitted to a military tribunal. By the time of the *Tribunal Superior* decision, Lieutenant Andrade had already escaped from the military base in Pasto, where he was being held.

By 1989 the region of the Magdalena Medio had become the staging ground for a national paramilitary movement that enjoyed widespread support in the Colombian armed forces.⁷⁴⁸ Years later it would be revealed that the massacre was planned in coordination with high-ranking Colombian army officers, including General Farouk Yanine Díaz, then commander of the II division in Bucaramanga.⁷⁴⁹ The paramilitaries who committed the La Rochela massacre belonged to the group *Muerte a Secuestradores*, often referred to simply as the MAS, or *los masetos*. While they may indeed have traced their roots back

⁷⁴⁷ Inter-American Court of Human Rights. "Case of the Rochela Massacre v. Colombia Judgment of May 11, 2007 (Merits, Reparations, and Costs)," 43.

⁷⁴⁸ See Medina, *Autodefensas, paramilitares y narcotráfico*.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

to the paramilitary group established in 1981 by drug traffickers and local army commanders as a means of defending business interests from the FARC, they represented a far greater security threat. Paramilitary groups who carried out more and more terrorist actions in the rural Magdalena Medio over the next few years, were poised to become the main repressive force at the national level.

Expansion of Human Rights Activism: Supporting Displaced Peasants

As military/paramilitary repression increased in the late 1980s, Barranca's status as a centre of labour, social and civic movement organization grew. National and international human rights organizations began organizing fact-finding trips to Barranca. One Bogotá-based social activist recalls working as a guide and translator for international visitors to Barranca:

The myth was built in my mind about Red Barranca, but in a good way. I saw it as a place where popular organizations on the ground had really taken on political organizing in an important way... There was an importance given to the civic organizing that took place in the *comunas* of Barranca as something to be followed, as something to be looked up to, as something that was significant... it wasn't all myth, there were some very real things happening that were examples for the rest of the country, important examples... Certainly Barranca was held up as a possibility. Look at what they are doing!⁷⁵⁰

Through these experiences, outside visitors formed their first concrete opinions about the problem of paramilitarism in the country. The activists drawn to Barranca learned valuable lessons in the politics and strategies of human rights protection.

It was during this period that the *Comité Ecuménico de Colombia* – a national human rights organization known today as the Interecclesial Commission for Justice and Peace, or simply *Justicia y Paz* – began working with displaced peasants in Barranca.

⁷⁵⁰ Anonymous interview with author (Bogotá, October 28, 2006).

The Refuge for Displaced Peasants, or *Albergue para Campesinos Desplazados*, was formally inaugurated by Barranca's Bishop Juan Francisco Sarasti on May 6, 1989.⁷⁵¹

The *albergue campesino* was the initiative of local representatives of the national peasant association *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos-Barranca* under the leadership of Ángel Tolosa and the Bogotá-based *Comité Ecuménico* under the leadership of Father Javier Giraldo, SJ.⁷⁵² With the support of the Catholic diocese of Barranca and the International Committee of the Red Cross, the *albergue campesino* was able to house dozens of families on a short-term basis and occasionally assist in the return of *campesinos* to areas from which they had been displaced.⁷⁵³ The *albergue campesino* also received support from local union and social movements, including CREDHOS, the USO, the Barranca municipal council, and the department of Santander teachers' union.

The fundamental guiding principle of the *albergue* was to provide protection to threatened peasant activists. Many of the first peasants to make use of the *albergue campesino* were community leaders from areas affected by the spread of paramilitarism into upland Santander and rural municipalities north of Barranca.⁷⁵⁴ Luisa Serrano – a former teachers' union activist and CREDHOS member who worked with the *albergue*

⁷⁵¹ Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "Inauguración de albergue," Bulletin. (June 1989). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁵² Father Giraldo is a prolific observer of human rights and social justice issues in Colombia. His frequently updated website is entitled *Desde los márgenes* (From the Margins). <http://www.javiergiraldo.org>.

⁷⁵³ Albergue Campesino, "Informe Albergue de Campesinos Damnificados por la Guerra Sucia Magdalena Medio," (January 1990), CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁵⁴ Including Carmen de Chucurí, San Vicente de Chucurí, San Pablo and Puerto Wilches. See Albergue Campesino, "Experiencia de derechos humanos en la región del Magdalena Medio (Proyecto Albergue Campesino)" (no date), CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

campesino – recalls that many of the people who came to stay at the shelter in Barranca were the most vulnerable members of violence-affected rural communities:

It was mainly children and mothers, pregnant women, or widows, sadly. I remember that one week something like 10 babies were born. It was impressive. The people who went to Barranca were the neediest. But in the midst of this, the idea of Father Javier Giraldo was to strengthen resistance movements.⁷⁵⁵

The vision of the *Comité Ecuménico* was ultimately to create a network of *albergues* or shelters for displaced people in different regions of Colombia. They did not consider the *albergue* to be a humanitarian project but rather a very visible way of building support for *campesino* organizations while denouncing the role of the armed forces in causing displacement in the Magdalena Medio. Those *campesinos* who sought shelter in the *albergue* were often accused by the army and the paramilitaries of being “subversives”, and the *albergue* itself was subject to threats and acts of intimidation.⁷⁵⁶

The basic principles of frontline protection for displaced people, of religious and international accompaniment, and of providing support for activist voices in the midst of armed conflict were forward-thinking strategies. The idea of setting up a community-based human rights organization in a poor *barrio* of the city was ground-breaking. Unlike CREDHOS, which functioned out of a lawyer’s office in central Barranca, the Refuge for Displaced Peasants was on the frontline. The *albergue* was set up along the main road in the furthest southeastern corner of Barranca, in one of the areas of most recent settlement by displaced peasants and other squatters. The facility consisted of one main building with several large rooms for communal sleeping and a fenced-in backyard. The *campesinos* who stayed in the *albergue* were accompanied by a small group of

⁷⁵⁵ Interview with autor (Bogotá, March 14, 2006).

⁷⁵⁶ Proyecto Albergue Campesino, “Experiencia de derechos humanos en la región del Magdalena Medio” (no date). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

Catholic nuns and a team of mostly young volunteers from Bogotá. Priests and lay workers from overseas connected to the *Comité Ecuménico* also spent periods of time living in the refuge. But the *albergue* remained vulnerable. As Luisa Serrano describes:

Talk about emergencies! Well, the paramilitaries tried to force their way into the *albergue*, like what happened to Leonardo Jaimes, the coordinator of the *albergue*. One time Leonardo had to run into the street in his underwear. They came to get me too. Luckily Gabriel Arias was the Human Rights Ombudsman at the time. We knew Gabriel and we could make sure that action was taken quickly to stop them. The paramilitaries entered the *albergue* and a witness came forward to say they were not paramilitaries, they were from the army in Puerto Berrío, that girl [the witness] later turned up dead.⁷⁵⁷

In subsequent years the philosophy and approach of the Barranca's Refuge for Displaced Peasants would be applied by *Justicia y Paz* and Father Javier Giraldo in other regions of Colombia, notably in war-torn Urabá in the northwest. The importance of working in coalition with *campesino* groups, the Catholic Church, and undertaking human rights work as a form of social activism were established during this period.

The Refuge for Displaced Peasants closed its doors in 1996 following a meeting of its "Support Committee" comprised of CREDHOS, the USO and various other groups, as well as individual activists. Luisa Serrano, who left Barranca in 1996 because of death threats and was granted asylum in Canada, comments: "It was a pilot experience. That has been recognized. I left the country when the *albergue* was still open. I met Javier Giraldo in Toronto and I remember him telling me with tears in his eyes that they had been forced to close the *albergue*."⁷⁵⁸ The *albergue* had been struggling for several years. *Albergue* staff and volunteers attributed a decline in usage of the facility by *campesinos* to several related factors: the diminished influence of *campesino* groups in

⁷⁵⁷ Interview with author (Bogotá, March 14, 2006).

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the countryside due to repression at the hands of paramilitaries; harassment of *albergue* staff, volunteers and guests by the military and police; political tensions among its coordinators; and changing patterns of displacement in the region. Increasingly, *campesinos* were seeking permanent refuge in the *barrios* of the city rather than temporary asylum, or a place to rest before returning to the countryside. With paramilitaries waiting for them back home and military personnel harassing the *albergue*, many displaced *campesinos* made alternative arrangements. Equally telling was the fatigue experienced inside the *albergue* itself, as tensions between different political groups were exacerbated by the escalating violence, and the space for social movement organizations was reduced.⁷⁵⁹ These, as we shall now see, were patterns that impacted CREDHOS as well.

The Attempted Annihilation of CREDHOS

The murder of Blanca Cecilia Valero de Durán was a disturbing reminder to all of the members of CREDHOS that nobody was safe. Blanca was shot at 6:00 p.m. on the street in front of the CREDHOS office on January 29, 1992. She had served as the organization's secretary since the beginning and had previously worked as a secretary in the law office of Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, which now served as CREDHOS' headquarters. Blanca's death is commemorated on a small plaque mounted on a cement stand located on 10th Street, opposite CREDHOS' original office and the city's historic marketplace.

⁷⁵⁹ In an internal evaluation conducted by members of the *albergue campesino*, a number of "alternative proposals" were generated as suggestions for continued advocacy work on behalf of displaced people in Barranca. Tellingly, several of these focused on the settlement and integration of migrants within the city itself. Proyecto Albergue Campesino, "Experiencia del albergue campesino de Barrancabermeja" (no date), CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

The site marks where Blanca was shot as she left the office at the end of another long day. Most of the people who walk or drive by every day probably never take notice of the innocuous monument. Yet of the six CREDHOS staff members assassinated between 1991 and 1992, Blanca's death is the most talked about. A number of other CREDHOS associates have been killed over the years, as recently as 2005. I focus on 1991-1992 because of the specific ways in which CREDHOS was targeted during an 18 month period of time. In each case the victim's association with CREDHOS was a major factor in his or her death.

More than anywhere else in Colombia, human rights work in Barrancabermeja entailed great risks, and members of CREDHOS came under direct fire from the Colombian military. CREDHOS received a steady stream of visitors at their office. People came from all over the city, and from rural areas around the Magdalena Medio, to file formal reports about missing people, deaths, detentions and maltreatment at the hands of security forces personnel. At the end of each year CREDHOS published and distributed to local groups and authorities comprehensive summaries of all of the cases they had reviewed, along with photographs taken of victims of torture and killings, copies of death threats received by CREDHOS signed by paramilitary groups, and photos of menacing graffiti. Most of the killings, abductions and incidents of torture documented by Colombian human rights groups since 1980 have involved direct contact between perpetrators and victims.⁷⁶⁰ Conventional military tactics were forsaken in favour of

⁷⁶⁰ The first major documentary project undertaken by a human rights group in Colombia was the 1974 "Black Book of Repression", published by Colombia's oldest human rights NGO, the Committee for Solidarity with Political Prisoners. Jorge Villegas Arango, *Libro negro de la represión: Frente Nacional, 1958-1974* (Bogotá: Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos, 1974).

premeditated massacre and serial murder. Individual murder is intimate and brutal. It is time-consuming and requires a great deal of patience and intelligence work.

The people who worked with CREDHOS during this tumultuous period were mostly social and political activists, and the first attacks on CREDHOS members can be explained in the context of a wider war on leftist and progressive forces in Barranca. The first two killings of CREHDOS members took place within three weeks of one another, in early 1991. Álvaro Bustos Castro was killed on February 27, 1991 in Barrio Las Granjas in the city's poor northeast district by a single gunshot to the head. Bustos Castro was a member of the Patriotic Union (UP) party who had been hired by CREDHOS as a bodyguard just one month prior to his death. Bustos' family initially told the press that they were unaware of any threats against him, but it would later surface that he had indeed been the target of an anonymous death threat.⁷⁶¹ The next CREDHOS victim was José Humberto Hernández Gavanzo, a 56 year-old retired oil worker and activist who had worked with the USO, ANUC and CREDHOS. Hernández was shot in the back four times at close range with a nine millimetre pistol on March 19, 1991 in Barrio el Paraíso, where he lived with his wife and three children. In media reports he was identified as a "former USO leader" rather than a member of CREDHOS.⁷⁶²

In 1992 clandestine agents working for the Colombian Navy carried out 68 political murders in Barrancabermeja.⁷⁶³ The case of the "07" naval intelligence network

⁷⁶¹ Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "Relación de casos: víctimas de homicidios miembros de CREDHOS," 1994. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁶² "Asesinado exdirigente de la USO," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), March 20, 1991.

⁷⁶³ Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS) and Corporación Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo (CAJAR), *Hoy como ayer*,

lays bare the close relationship that has always existed between paramilitaries and Colombian security forces in Barranca. It also demonstrates the double challenge that most human rights defenders have faced in Colombia: that of investigating the links between clandestine and regular armed forces, while simultaneously trying to evade personal attacks. In 1991 the Colombian Defense Ministry signed Order 200-05/91, authorizing the creation of civilian intelligence networks to monitor the activities of suspected guerrillas and guerrilla sympathizers. Ostensibly, the legislation was meant to facilitate intelligence gathering. In practice, Order 200-05/91 allowed junior and mid-level security forces personnel to take advantage of their existing relationships with paramilitaries.⁷⁶⁴ One former Colombian marine explained that 700,000 *pesos* would be withdrawn from a special fund, ostensibly to be paid out to an informant, but that 600,000 *pesos* of the total would be transferred to assassins.⁷⁶⁵

On the day Blanca Cecilia Valero de Durán was killed, January 29, 1992, all of the highest-ranking military officials in the region were in Barranca attending a special security meeting convened by the departmental government of Santander. CREDHOS president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo had just returned from a three-month stay in Washington, D.C. a couple of days before. CREDHOS' president had spent time in the

persistiendo por la vida: redes de inteligencia y exterminio en Barrancabermeja (Bogotá: CREDHOS, CAJAR, 1999).

⁷⁶⁴ In 1994 four officers and three non-commissioned officers, including Marine Lieutenant Colonel Rodrigo Quiñónez Cárdenas, were “severely reprimanded” for conspiring to form paramilitary groups in the port city of Barrancabermeja. Five years later, then Rear Admiral Rodrigo Quiñónez would be “administratively sanctioned” for “failing to prevent” the massacre of 27 unarmed civilians in Chengue, Sucre. U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2003,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State. (Washington, D.C.: February 25, 2004). National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks*, 36.

U.S. on a scholarship with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS). While in Washington he had done lobbying work on Capitol Hill with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of civil society organizations that carries out research and advocacy work on U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America.⁷⁶⁶ Gómez Lizarazo had been recognized by the Institute for Policy Studies with the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award in October of 1991.⁷⁶⁷

It was a Wednesday evening, about 6:30 p.m., and the CREDHOS office was still busy. Just past 6:00 p.m. Jahel Quiroga, who lived more than 30 minutes outside of Barranca in the Ecopetrol camp at El Centro, called for a taxi and spent a few moments finishing up some paperwork. Nothing unusual whatsoever. Except that Quiroga did not finish her work on time, and asked Blanca Valero to cancel the taxi. Valero asked if she could take the taxi herself, so she could get home in time to prepare dinner for her family. Valero and another colleague left the office and descended the short, unlit staircase to the street below. Halfway down the stairs, Valero realised she had to go back upstairs to leave behind a package that she had been carrying in her bag. Worried about missing the taxi, she asked her colleague to run back up to the office for her. Valero continued on, and, when she reached the street, she was shot by a gunman riding on the back of a

⁷⁶⁶ Washington Office on Latin America letter to United States Congressional Offices, RE: Appeal for Response to killing in Colombia. January 30, 1992. CREDHOS Archive, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁶⁷ The Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) is a Washington-based think tank that every year recognizes a human rights defender with an award named after exiled Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and U.S. activist Ronni Karpen Moffitt, killed in 1976 by a car bomb in Washington, D.C. Letelier and Moffitt were killed by Chilean secret service agents, under orders from the government of Augusto Pinochet.

motorcycle.⁷⁶⁸ The newspaper reported witnesses hearing Valero shout “it’s not me!” as she fell to the pavement.⁷⁶⁹

Not unlike the killing of Sandra Rondón, the murder of Blanca Cecilia Valero inspired a public outcry in Barranca. Valero husband and three children did not recall Blanca ever receiving a death threat. She had no personal political involvements, and, even though she worked for CREDHOS, Valero was not considered to be an activist. The day after Blanca was killed, Barranca was shut down by a *paro cívico* in her memory that lasted 35 hours. The USO oil workers union shut down the refinery, and thousands of people took to the streets. Guerrillas set fire to two city buses and sabotaged an oil pipeline on the outskirts of town.⁷⁷⁰ The day following the *paro cívico* a letter in support of CREDHOS signed by 10 members of the U.S. Senate was sent to Colombian President César Gaviria Trujillo.⁷⁷¹ On February 5, just one week after the murder, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States wrote to Colombian Foreign Minister Nohemí Sanín to ask that emergency “precautionary measures” be taken to protect the life of CREDHOS president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo.⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁸ Immediately across the street from the CREDHOS office are two banks, and the area is often patrolled by police. The office is located less than one kilometre from the army battalion where the Security Council Meeting was held that same day.

⁷⁶⁹ “Asesinada secretaria de Derechos Humanos,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), January 30, 1992.

⁷⁷⁰ “Sin transporte Barrancabermeja,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), January 31, 1992.

⁷⁷¹ Letter to Colombian President César Gaviria Trujillo from United States Senator Alan Cranston, et al., January 31, 1992. CREDHOS Archives.

⁷⁷² The Inter-American Commission was established in 1959 by the Organization of American States as a means of investigating claims of human rights abuses by OAS member states, ordering states to take action on urgent cases where individuals or communities are under threat, and referring cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in San José, Costa Rica, for adjudication.

Gómez is described by the OAS human rights agency as having “received constant and serious death threats”.⁷⁷³

Blanca Valero was killed the day after an opinion piece by CREDHOS president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo appeared in the *New York Times* in which he linked U.S. military assistance to Colombia with an upsurge in political violence in the Magdalena Medio. In the article, Gómez asked the U.S. Congress to hold hearings on human rights in Colombia.⁷⁷⁴ He argued that the escalation of paramilitary violence should give U.S. lawmakers pause to reconsider the Andean Regional Initiative:

The U.S. must bear some responsibility for this situation. From 1988 to 1991, its military aid to Colombia increased sevenfold. (...) The main victims of Government and Government-supported military actions are not traffickers but political opposition figures, community activists, trade union leaders and human rights workers.⁷⁷⁵

Gómez argued that the Colombian military was working with illegal paramilitaries and drug traffickers, “forcing human rights activists to abandon their regions and try to do their work from Bogotá or abroad”.⁷⁷⁶ Gómez had no idea how true his words would turn out to be.

In May, June and July of 1992 paramilitary assassins paid by the Colombian Navy murdered another three members of CREDHOS. Ismael Jaimes Cortes was shot and

⁷⁷³ Marco Tulio Bruni Cellis, President of the Inter-Americana Commission on Human Rights letter to Noemí Sanín Posada de Rubio, Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs, February 5, 1992. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁷⁴ The first hearings on human rights by the House Subcommittee on International Organizations of the U.S. Congress were held from August to December 1973. Brazil and Chile were the only two Latin American cases discussed in detail at these inaugural hearings. Hearings can cover specific countries at the discretion of the Commission. Sikkink, *Mixed Signals*, 66.

⁷⁷⁵ Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, “Colombian Blood, U.S. Guns,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1992.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

killed on May 6, 1992 in the central Barrio Torcoroma, moments after dropping his two small children off at a daycare centre. Thirty-eight years old at the time of his death, Jaimes was a city councillor, a member of the Patriotic Union (UP) and publisher of the influential local weekly newspaper *La Opinión del Magdalena Medio*. Ismael Jaimes' funeral attracted hundreds of mourners, including dozens of the city's most prominent journalists, social movement activists, representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, and municipal government. Presidential Peace Commissioner Horacio Serpa Uribe even made the trip from Bogotá.⁷⁷⁷ To commemorate the legacy of Ismael Jaimes, Barranca's four main radio stations produced a day-long coordinated simulcast of tributes to Jaimes and commentary on the situation in Barranca.⁷⁷⁸ A former naval intelligence official linked to a series of political killings in Barrancabermeja later claimed that Jaimes had been killed because of his work as a journalist uncovering abuses committed by state security forces.⁷⁷⁹

The next killing of a member of CREDHOS was Julio César Berrío, just 25 years old. Berrío was shot five times at close range on the street in central Barranca on June 25, 1992. Hired as a bodyguard by Jorge Gómez Lizarazo, Julio César Berrío had begun to take on investigative work as well, and was very much identified as a member of CREDHOS.⁷⁸⁰ Following Berrío's death, Jorge Gómez accused the Colombian government of undermining the work of CREDHOS: "...it looks like the goal is to throw us out of the Magdalena Medio".⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁷ "Se calló *La Opinión*," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 7, 1992.

⁷⁷⁸ "Ismael Jaimes Cortés," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 8, 1992.

⁷⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Colombia's Killer Networks*, 35.

⁷⁸⁰ "Homocidio," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), June 30, 1992.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Ligia Patricia Córdoba Colmenares, the coordinator of CREDHOS' education program, was one of three people killed in a massacre at a popular restaurant on July 30, 1992. ANUC activist and coordinator of Barranca's recently-opened *Albergue Campesino*, René Tavera Sosa, and the president of the San Silvestre Transportation Workers Union, Parmenio Ruíz Suárez, were the other two victims. At 11:30 a.m. the three colleagues were sitting together in *Restaurante La Shannon* when two men drove up on a motorcycle.⁷⁸² The gunman and driver were recognized by eyewitnesses.⁷⁸³ Ancizar Castaño Buitrago, alias "Cachetes", was one of the most prolific assassins utilized by naval intelligence in Barranca. He is believed to have been the gunman in the killings of Ligia Patricia Córdoba and Ismael Jaimes, and five other cases in 1992.⁷⁸⁴ The *La Shannon* massacre had been announced in advance. Trade unionist Parmenio Ruíz knew he was going to be killed; he had the foresight to send a letter to the *Procuraduría* in Barranca in which he described death threats and even named his killer.⁷⁸⁵

As we have seen, the shift to human rights activism was a response to extreme circumstances. It was a "state of emergency" declared by the city's social movements, to borrow a phrase Walter Benjamin. Barranca social movements responded to the *La Shannon* massacre with a renewed cycle of street protests, work stoppages and public

⁷⁸² "Quieren sacarnos de Barranca," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), June 30, 1992.

⁷⁸³ Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "Relación de casos: víctimas de homicidios miembros de CREDHOS," 1994. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁸⁴ Subsequently, Ancizar Castaño Buitrago would be arrested and investigated by Colombian judicial authorities for his involvement in various political murders in Barranca. On 24 February 1998 Castaño was sentenced *in absentia* to 30 years in prison on charges of homicide and terrorism. CREDHOS and CAJAR, *Hoy como ayer*, 180.

⁷⁸⁵ "Asesinato de Parmenio Ruíz Suárez: muerte cantada," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), August 6, 1992.

denunciations made by CREDHOS through declarations to the press and communiqués sent to the national government. While not a full *paro cívico*, the protests organized by the unions, transport workers, and the *Coordinadora Popular*, including CREDHOS, prompted the cancellation of public school classes, bus services and most commercial activities for a 24-hour period. In addition to the city's social movements, the Barranca Chamber of Commerce (*Cámara de Comercio*) and Committee for Business Associations (*Comité de Gremios*), as well as mainstream political parties publicly denounced the massacre through the press.

The day of protest began and ended calmly, and the *Coordinadora Popular* blamed the massacre on the army. At the same time, the commander of the Nueva Granada Battalion, Colonel Fabio Luis García Chávez, shot back that the FARC and ELN were carrying out clandestine operations “to disturb public order and then blame the Armed Forces”.⁷⁸⁶ The implication was that the massacre may have been a guerrilla operation intended to look like a covert army or paramilitary operation. At the time, there were numerous cases denounced by CREDHOS of civilians killed by the armed forces and then either dressed in guerrilla uniforms or simply claimed by the Army as enemy soldiers killed in combat. As such, there was a fair amount of confusion and false reports and rumours circulating, making CREDHOS' job that much more difficult. The investigations into the *La Shannon* case carried out by local investigators with the Attorney General's office produced several eyewitness statements implicating army soldiers directly in the massacre.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸⁶ “Sin transporte Barrancabermeja,” *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), January 31, 1992.

⁷⁸⁷ CREDHOS and CAJAR, *Hoy, como ayer*, 93-95.

The initial response of Barranca's social movements to the war on human rights activists was to rally together. CREDHOS held its Third General Assembly in a large conference hall on the top floor of the Hotel Bachué in downtown Barranca on the evening of June 17, 1993. The meeting began with a moment of silence for the members of CREDHOS who had been killed in recent years. Community activist and CREDHOS treasurer Evangelina Marín took a few moments to update the membership roll. She explained that of the 160 original 'associates' of CREDHOS, seven had been killed and ten had left the city. A total of 115 original CREDHOS associates retained their voting rights, 54 of whom were in attendance. At a meeting of the Board of Directors held the day before, an additional 141 people were ratified as associates, of whom 63 were in attendance. An additional 78 people had applied to join CREDHOS by showing up for the General Assembly. In total then, in June 1993, CREDHOS was comprised of 379 associates. In spite of, or perhaps because of, all of the fear that surrounded CREDHOS, the organization had more than doubled in size in the space of two years. The General Assembly increased the number of people on the Board of Directors from 10 to 17. The members of the directorate included representatives of all of the major civil society organizations in the city.⁷⁸⁸ They also recognized the work of human rights "promoters" or representatives of CREDHOS in the *municipios* of Sabana de Torres, Yondó, Puerto Wilches and San Pablo. The group that would endeavour to bring CREDHOS forward

⁷⁸⁸ *Pastoral Social*, the *Unión Sindical Obrera*, and the *Organización Femenina Popular*, and others.

into the next era included teachers, oil workers, members of the Communist Party, community organizers, municipal officials, lawyers, and a Catholic priest.⁷⁸⁹

The killing of CREDHOS-affiliated activists came in the midst of a tumultuous period in Barranca's history. Of the 512 homicides reported by CREDHOS in 1991 for the Magdalena Medio region as a whole, 365 were alleged to have been carried out in Barranca.⁷⁹⁰ In a report published at the time, CREDHOS wrote: "Community leaders, lawyers, journalists, politicians from all parties and people who are critical of the state and the government in power, have all now become targets".⁷⁹¹

The Changing Nature of Popular Protest

In her 1989 study of Barranca's municipal politics, María Emma Wills observes that the *paros cívicos por la vida* organized between 1987 and 1993 lacked the cohesiveness of past struggles. *Paros cívicos*, according to Wills, were no longer engines of social movement organization, but powerful outbursts of grief: "These are irregular and sudden explosions of grief that do not transcend the immediate moment".⁷⁹² The changing nature of social protest in Barranca during the late 1980s was a direct result of the increase in political violence in the city. While the basic forms of protest did not

⁷⁸⁹ Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "III Asamblea General de Socios de CREDHOS", Acta 001 de 1993, Barrancabermeja, Colombia (June 17, 1993). CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja.

⁷⁹⁰ Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, "Informe Presentado por el Comité Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en el Magdalena Medio," March 13, 1992. CREDHOS Archives, Barrancabermeja, 1992.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹² Wills, *La democracia: un camino por recorrer*, 43.

change, the motives for *paro cívicos* were substantially different. Traditional struggles for social services and infrastructure were eclipsed by the struggle for basic human rights.

There also occurred in this period a changing of the guard, and an accompanying trend away from the grassroots civil protest organizing of the 1970s and 1980s. The closure or retreat of important activist projects in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as the *Frente Amplio del Magdalena Medio*, the *Albergue Campesino*, ANUC and the *Coordinadora Campesina del Magdalena Medio* represented a serious challenge to the future of popular movement organizing. A number of individual activists decided to leave the city. Some, like oil workers union organizer Alonso Martínez Arias, sent a letter to the regional office of the Colombian Internal Affairs Agency in which he described receiving written death threats and observing people following him in Barranca. CREDHOS helped Alonso Martínez to draft the letter, copies of which were sent to Ecopetrol and kept on file at CREDHOS and the USO.⁷⁹³ In particular, the departure from Barranca of Father Eduardo Díaz due to threats was particularly hard to accept. As leader of the *Pastoral Social*, his exile to Vancouver, Canada, left a serious vacuum. Barranca's *Pastoral Social* would re-establish itself under the leadership of Father Nel Beltrán Santamaría, now Bishop of Sincelejo. But it never regained its role within the city's popular movements with quite the same dynamism.

The "civic" character of the *paro cívico* would also be undermined by the process of militarization of the city. Invariably, *paros cívicos* prompted the mobilization of riot police, the army and the guerrillas. Photos of armour-clad policemen, tanks, masked youth and billowing black smoke appeared in the national press. Young men waving

⁷⁹³ Alonso Martínez Arias letter to Jaime Troconis, Procurador Regional, Barrancabermeja (March 17, 1992). CREDHOS Archives Barrancabermeja.

flags identifying themselves with the ELN made appearances at the barricades of *paros cívicos* from 1986 onwards. More and more it was an inevitability. Francisco Campos, a former CREDHOS activist and spokesperson for the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*, suggests that the guerrillas undermined the civic protest movement by attempting to dominate *paros cívicos*. As the guerrillas began to feel that their hold on Barranca was threatened, they seized on these protests:

Later, unfortunately, the guerrillas started to take advantage of the spaces created by the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* and they started to organize what they called armed strikes [*paros armados*]. That absolutely killed civic protest. Before, the guerrilla was present, but they allowed civic demonstrations to be carried out. After 1995 they started to take armed actions that undermined civic action. And they began to damage the structure of social movement.⁷⁹⁴

In media reports, the *paro cívico* in Barranca was increasingly confused or conflated with the *paro armado*. Guerrilla *milicianos* often showed up at *paros cívicos* to distribute pamphlets, wave flags, and brandish weapons. By the middle of the 1990s, participation in public protests would decline.

Thus, towards the middle of the 1990s guerrilla-imposed *paros armados* became common and *paros cívicos* increasingly rare. As we have seen, in the late 1980s, the guerrillas would occasionally show up at *paros cívicos*, faces covered with bandanas or balaclavas. On the process of the militarization of the *paro cívico*, and the sharp decline in public participation, Rafael Gómez, a former leader of the oil workers' union and CREDHOS co-founder, observed:

The people participating in the *paros cívicos* got scared, I think. They got scared. People went out into the streets to fight for water, electricity, whatever, but it was not their intention to become guerrillas, that was a negative. The *paro cívico* was supposed to be a popular struggle. In the heat of the moment, in the heat of the struggle, people took out guns... so people stopped coming out to *the paros*

⁷⁹⁴ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, September 20, 2005).

cívicos. Imagine a *paro cívico* on 28th Street near the As de Copas, sometimes the street would fill up with people all the way to the USO. It was massive. People would go to the level crossing over the railroad tracks, guarding the barricades. Even at 2 or 3 in the morning there were people, but later on there would be shots fired, gunfights, military confrontations, and the people went back to their homes. People wanted to show that the problems were serious, but not everyone wanted to trade shots with the army.⁷⁹⁵

Guerrillas – the largest group being the *Frente Urbano de Resistencia Yarigués* (FURY), the urban militia of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, comprised mainly of young men from the *barrios orientales* – would formally begin a *paro armado* by contacting local radio stations, distributing pamphlets, or simply spreading the word among friends. Many people would stock up on food at the market, leave work early, and take whatever precautions they felt necessary in order to stay off the streets. The *paro armado* would begin with the torching of a city bus or some other highly visible action. From the black smoke rising into the air, locals would know that the *paro armado* was underway.

Barrancabermeja was recognized as a major centre of armed conflict in Colombia. In the Magdalena Medio, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) reinforced its armed presence in Barrancabermeja in the mid 1980s through the creation of the Yarigués Urban Resistance Front (FURY).⁷⁹⁶ Toward the end of the 1980s the ELN established the Capitan Parmenio Front, named after an early ELN leader who had died in combat, and the Manuel Gustavo Chacón Front, named after the slain leader of the *Unión Sindical Obrera*, both of which carried out activities in the vicinity of Barranca.⁷⁹⁷ The growth of urban militia in Barranca became a model for other urban centres: for instance, a young

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁶ Andrés Ricardo Vargas Castillo, “Guerra civil y violencia de guerra civil contra las organizaciones sociales de Barrancabermeja,” Working paper 9 (Bogotá: Centro de Recursos para el Análisis de Conflictos, CERAC, Universidad Pontificia La Javeriana, December 2008), 7.

⁷⁹⁷ Hernández, *Rojo y negro*, 373.

miliciano commander from Barranca is credited with helping to organize urban militia in the poor neighbourhoods of Medellín in the late 1980s.⁷⁹⁸

Barranca would also garner more and more international attention. At the request of local social activists, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited Barrancabermeja in September 1992. It was the Commission's first visit to Colombia since 1984 and came at a time when violence in the country was beginning to spiral. In October 1994 Peace Brigades International, a human rights organization that provides unarmed protective accompaniment to social activists in conflict areas, arrived in Barranca at the joint request of CREDHOS and the Refuge for Displaced Peasants. When a half dozen volunteers from Spain, Belgium and the United States began their work of accompaniment in Barranca, CREDHOS members were being protected by armed bodyguards paid for and licensed by the Colombia National Police. As a precondition stipulated by Peace Brigades, CREDHOS made the "remarkable" decision to renounce the use of armed bodyguards. In an interview conducted in 1995, CREDHOS president Osiris Bayter commented:

We have always told the government... that human rights work is incompatible with weapons; much less so with having them right in your office, where people would come, full of fear, to lodge their complaints and testimonies about abuses. After awhile the people stopped coming – seeing the police there and we had to start going to their houses to take testimony.⁷⁹⁹

And so began the long and difficult process of rebuilding the organization and reconceiving CREDHOS' role in Barranca. In 1993 five prominent members of CREDHOS, including three key co-founders, took refuge abroad, in Chile and Costa

⁷⁹⁸ Gilberto Medina Franco, *Una historia de las milicias de Medellín* (Medellín: Instituto Popular de Capacitación, IPC, 2006), 14.

⁷⁹⁹ As quoted in Mahony and Eguren, *Unarmed Bodyguards*, 231.

Rica. Remarkably, CREDHOS did not close its offices; neither did the *Organización Femenina Popular*, the *Coordinadora Popular* or the USO.

Conclusion: Reaching Beyond the Magdalena Medio

CREDHOS was attacked both because it sought to expose human rights violators and because it represented an attempt by Barranca-based social movements to advance an agenda of social change beyond the mainstream of international human rights discourse. This deadly conflict between CREDHOS and the Colombian military is emblematic of a larger struggle over the meaning and applications of human rights in Colombia. The terms of contemporary discussions around human rights in Colombia were set by the early 1990s. The work of these early human rights defenders informed the way in which human rights struggles around Colombia were waged, and the way in which transnational activism for human rights in Colombia developed. In a 1992 interview conducted with a local newspaper, Jorge Gómez Lizarazo said that "...the violations of human rights in our region have transcended geographic borders".⁸⁰⁰ That is precisely what would occur. Colombia became the focus of attention of international human rights advocacy in Latin America for the next decade. The challenge for Barranca activists would be to maintain the spirit of the *paros cívicos* and the civic-popular movement, which was changing in response to the constant barrage of attacks being sustained by popular leaders and the increasingly improvised and volatile way in which these protests were being carried out.

In the late 1980s human rights became the language of a new generation of social activists who sought to transform Colombian society through non-violent means and

⁸⁰⁰ "Comisión de la OEA escuchó quejas," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), July 6, 1992.

challenge the longstanding fiction that Colombia's decades-old armed conflict was fundamentally a clash between belligerent armies. In Colombia there exists an interrelated set of conflicts involving various armed actors. By taking up the cause of human rights, Colombian social movements have highlighted the fact that the majority of the victims of political violence in Colombia are in fact non-combatants, including many social and political activists. While this revelation is an extraordinary achievement, certain key human rights "truths" in Colombia, such as the complicity of the Colombian military with paramilitary crimes, remain the subject of incendiary debates. As anthropologist Winifred Tate writes: "...human rights activism is an effort to bring certain public secrets into the public transcript, to make what is known but denied part of the general discussions about the nature and cause of violence and possible solutions".⁸⁰¹ Because of the efforts of groups like CREDHOS, no discussion of the Colombian conflict can plausibly overlook the ways in which Colombian state security forces, their paramilitary allies, and leftist guerrillas have targeted civilians.

⁸⁰¹ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 293.

Conclusion

Human Rights and Social Change

Human rights defenders in the Magdalena Medio are human rights defenders by conviction, they have to put themselves at risk in defending the lives of others. I know human rights defenders across the world who can teach us many things that we do not know, and they deserve all of our respect, our admiration. But the love that we have for what we do, the self-sacrifice, the *mística*... here human rights work is militant work.¹

Francisco Campos, human rights defender

Local Origins: The Movement for Human Rights in Barrancabermeja

This dissertation has addressed the question of why, how, and to what effect people living in Colombia's war-torn oil capital have organized collectively to assert human rights. Human rights movements are contingent on particular histories, and recent struggles for rights and justice in Colombia have deep local and national roots. The history of the oil town of Barrancabermeja, and its region of Magdalena Medio, sheds light on the sources and outcomes of political violence in Colombia in the twentieth century, and the relationship between different modes of popular social and political organizing. The movement for human rights in Barrancabermeja is linked to oil, and the strong presence of the national state, as well as union and social movements, left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries. By looking at human rights from the "bottom-up" we are able to better explain the ways in which human rights activists impact and are impacted by the dynamics of political violence.

¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, September 20, 2005).

The case of the oil refinery town of Barrancabermeja shows that social movements are strongest in places where the state presence is strongest. Although Barrancabermeja is distant from Colombia's national capital, located in what is generally thought of as a frontier region, there is a strong state presence owing to oil. The national oil company Ecopetrol and various branches of the Colombian military have been the backbone of this presence. Barranca is also home to regional offices of all of the national judicial institutions responsible for overseeing human rights in Colombia. Furthermore, for decades it has been home to the most important trade union movement in Colombian history. The specific configuration of social activists and state institutions in Barrancabermeja has given impetus and shape to social protest. Throughout the twentieth century, Colombia's ruling Liberal and Conservative parties consorted to guarantee the flow of oil through repressive actions against trade unionists carried out during interruptions of the constitutional order known as declarations of "state of siege". For local residents, the national state has represented a foil to popular radicalism.

Stimulated by the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO) oil workers' union, the city's labour and social movements have worked alongside and in coalition with one another. The oil wealth that flows through Barranca has made the city a pole of attraction for migrants from all over the country and beyond. But relatively few benefited directly from living in the shadow of the Tropical Oil Company or the Colombian Petroleum Company, Ecopetrol: as political scientist Terry Lynn Karl observes, oil and coal, which are the most capital intensive industries in the world, create very few jobs relative to

profits.² Oil economies have a tendency to boom and bust: as the life stories of itinerant wildcatters and roughnecks attest, wells are emptied and investments shifted, often leaving behind a parched landscape, but little else.³ Barranca's relationship to oil is somewhat different, and reveals a different dimension of the history of oil than that associated with drilling activities and their impact. The Tropical Oil Company built a refinery that has been in continuous operation since 1922. This fact has meant that there have been several thousand relatively well-paid positions in the oil industry based in Barranca for most of the past century. However, the overwhelming of the migrants who traveled to Barranca did not find work with the oil company. And there were few guarantees for oil workers themselves, who were poorly housed and subject to arbitrary treatment by "La Troco".

More than just a consequence of foreign investment, social and political conflict in Barranca during the Tropical Oil Company era occurred within a volatile political context, regionally and nationally. In the 1920s, during the last decade of Conservative Party rule, there was growing frustration in Colombia over the exclusion of most citizens from meaningful participation in politics. Barranca's labour movement leveraged nationalist sentiment against transnational interests, offering an alternative to traditional politics through strikes and street protests, and challenging the Colombian establishment to address issues of social justice. Barranca became a Mecca for new socialist movements and, later, an important base of support for progressive Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. At its peak in the late 1940s, in response to the murder of Jorge

² Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 47.

³ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

Eliécer Gaitán, the popular movement in Barranca mounted an armed uprising, led by *gaitanista* and future Liberal guerrilla leader Rafael Rangel.

In the history of Barranca there are several key moments of dramatic change corresponding to local, national and international conjunctures. The first of these occurred at the time of the nationalization of the refinery in Barranca in 1961, which coincided with the creation of the National Front government in Colombia and the onset of a Cold War counterinsurgency campaign against Communists and left-wing social activists. Contrary to expectations, the nationalization of oil in Colombia occasioned a re-awakening of class conflict and social unrest. The Colombian national government was seen by union organizers as antagonistic to workers' interests. Barranca had developed largely outside of the patronage networks and battles between Liberals and Conservatives that structured social relations in many other regions of Colombia.⁴ This was partly due to a long history of bipartisan national government support for the Tropical Oil Company, ahead of the interests of workers. As such, in the 1960s, the city was home to strong bases of support for left-wing political groupings that had been excluded from participation in the National Front, including the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC) and the Liberal Revolutionary Movement (MRL). Left-wing political parties were very influential within labour and social movements, including the oil workers union, which was affiliated with a Communist-oriented labour federation, the *Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Colombia* (CSTC), from 1964 to 1970.

Colombia's two largest Marxist guerrilla groups established themselves early in the Magdalena Medio region, exerting a powerful influence on Barranca. The guerrillas

⁴ Francisco Leal Buitrago, *Clientelismo. El sistema político y su expresión regional* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores SID, IEPRI Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1991).

were a source of inspiration to progressive social movement organizers and a justification for increased state intervention in the lives of ordinary citizens. Established in the mountainous region of Santander near Barrancabermeja, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) directly descended from the popular nationalist and radical fighters who had settled Magdalena Medio during the War of a Thousand Days (1898-1902) and *La Violencia* (1946-1958). During the early years, ELN members Juan de Dios Aguilera and Victor Medina Morón helped the guerrillas to set up a network of support in Barranca. The presence of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in the Magdalena Medio region is equally significant, though often overlooked. The Communist Party of Colombia (PCC), which was aligned with the FARC for more than 30 years, was very influential among unionized workers in Barranca and in the port towns of Puerto Berrío and Puerto Boyacá.⁵ Like the ELN, the regional variant of the FARC, centred in the southern Magdalena Medio, was descended from peasants who had fought against the Conservative Party during *La Violencia* in the 1940s and 1950s.

The emergence of new social movements in Barranca during the 1970s took place at a time of another significant change in the character of the state presence, as the main forms and objectives of popular protest shifted from a focus on working conditions in the oil industry to a focus on local development. New paths for social action and collaboration opened in response to restrictions placed on union activities. The severe repression of the oil workers' union by the national government following strikes in 1971 and 1977 created opportunities for a broad-based popular movement to emerge, comprised mainly of urban squatters, peasants, Catholic Church activists and community

⁵ Chernick, "Negotiating Peace amid Multiple Forms of Violence," 197.

organizers. Previously, during the era of the Tropical Oil Company, oil workers' demands had often included appeals for improved health services, education, access to potable water, and other issues that touched the lives of all residents of Barrancabermeja. Oil workers' strikes were constrained affairs by comparison, first and foremost industrial actions. Following the departure of "La Troco", the city grew dramatically through rural-urban migration and *barranqueños* from all walks of life began to make demands directly to the national government through the advent of the *paro cívico*, or civil strike. The *paro cívico* was a form of mass protest that involved the mobilization of the entire community, not just unionized workers. The main goals of the *paros cívicos* in Barrancabermeja related to issues of local development, including demands that the national government upgrade social services and infrastructure. It would become the most important form of popular protest during the 1970s and beyond.

Peasant organizations also play a major role in the history of social protest in the Magdalena Medio. Peasants were the first to be impacted by political violence, and the first to take up the cause of human rights. Agrarian conflicts in the rural Magdalena Medio in the 1960s gave rise to strong peasant alliances, including the National Association of Peasants (ANUC) and the *Coordinadora Campesina del Magdalena Medio*. These groups led large-scale rural land invasions, protest marches, strikes and mass migrations involving thousands of people, demanding the recognition of property rights. Peasant organizations in the Magdalena Medio region were the first to raise concerns around the impact of political violence. Beginning in the mid 1960s they denounced counterinsurgency measures implemented by the Colombian military, notably in terms of restrictions on freedom of movement.

The relationship between rural violence and urban social movements is critical to understanding the process of popular movement formation in Barranca. Economic opportunities and violence can transform *campesinos* into labourers, and labourers can be transformed into *campesinos*. In Barranca this has long been evident, as *campesinos* lease, lend or abandon their parcels of land in search of work in the city. They may undertake jobs in the service sector, or even skilled industrial positions on contract, and return to their farms on a regular basis to assist in harvests or send remittances back to family members who stayed on the land. Without denying the centrality of organized labour in local politics, it is helpful to recall that the majority of *barranqueños* are migrants, or the children of migrants, whose family histories are defined by successive migrations from countryside to city, and vice-versa. As Catherine LeGrand writes, patterns of migration and urbanization in Colombia “question the usefulness of typologies that, by positing a structural distinction between peasants and proletarians, neglect the historical dynamics of class formation”.⁶

Internal refugees from paramilitary violence have played a triple role in the construction of Barranca’s civic identity. Firstly, Barranca was built up as a result of violence, particularly in new eastern *barrios* settled by displaced peasants, which would become areas of strong guerrilla influence. Secondly, internal refugees would bring their struggles to the urban environment. *Campesino* identities are not static and neither are their relationships to armed actors operating in the countryside. Thirdly, many displaced peasants became targets of state and para-state repression, stigmatized as the “social

⁶ Catherine LeGrand, “Colombian Transformations: Peasants and Wage-Labourers in the Santa Marta Banana Zone,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 11:4 (1984), 178.

bases of the insurgency”. They were considered outsiders, delinquent elements that represented real threats to the police and army.⁷

The role of the institutional Catholic Church as a central force behind social movement organizing in Barranca is exceptional in the Colombian context.⁸ The Catholic Church provided leadership on issues of social justice, developed a grassroots structure that allowed poor urban squatters to become involved in popular protests, and mediated rural and urban people’s sense that they belonged to a distinct region.⁹ It is exceptional that the diocese of Barrancabermeja maintained a socially and politically progressive orientation.¹⁰ As political scientist Daniel H. Levine has observed, the mainstream Colombian Catholic Church is very conservative, and apart from the participation of a few priests in Marxist movements since the 1960s, there has been

⁷ Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – Sector Independiente, *A hacha y machete: tierra pa’l que la trabaja*, Barrancabermeja, June 1984, 5.

⁸ There was also an interesting progressive priest-led social experiment in San Gil, Santander for several decades, described in Marietta Bucheli G., *Curas, campesinos y laicos como gerentes del desarrollo: la construcción de un modelo de desarrollo emergente en Colombia* (San Gil, Colombia: Fundación Editora Social de San Gil, 2006).

⁹ The Catholic Church, along with the Colombian military, civil society groups, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and national judicial authorities, all maintain regional structures that give shape to the physical territory known as the Magdalena Medio.

¹⁰ One noteworthy point of comparison is the rural diocese of Facatativá, Cundinamarca. Covering 6,788 square kilometres, with a population of nearly half a million divided into 32 parishes, Facatativá borders the Diocese of Barrancabermeja to the south. The diocese of Facatativá was a rare centre of Christian Base Community organizing in Colombia in the 1970s and 1980s. Under the leadership of Spanish priest Román Cortés, and a young Bogotá-born vicar-general by the name of Jaime Prieto Amaya, the diocese of Facatativá built up a network of rural education programs, cooperatives and small development projects. Jamie Prieto Amaya left the diocese of Facatativá in 1993 to become Bishop of Barrancabermeja. For background on Facatativá and its uniqueness in Colombian history, see Daniel H. Levine, “Colombia: The Institutional Church and the Popular”, in Daniel H. Levine, ed., *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 204.

relatively little “explicitly political” community-based religious activism.¹¹ A number of young priests inspired by the teachings of Vatican II and Liberation Theology were assigned to Barrancabermeja when the diocese was created in 1963. The establishment of the *Pastoral Social* in 1970 as a community service branch of the diocese then offered priests, nuns and lay missionaries opportunities to work among poor urban squatters. The *Pastoral Social* would form the backbone of community-based social movement organizing and helped to renew the culture of protest in Barranca.

The work of building and sustaining social movements in Barranca has been greatly facilitated by economic, political and social continuities particular to the city’s status as an oil refining enclave. While Colombia stumbled through the Great Depression in the 1930s and lurched toward civil war in the 1940s, Barranca remained relatively stable. As argued above, the stability that existed in Barranca was heavily slanted in favour of the oil company, its managers, and a small but prosperous class of engineers, technicians and administrative staff who lived inside highly securitized residential camps. The upshot was a high degree of labour conflict and social tension, and a strong culture of mistrust and resentment toward the Tropical Oil Company, and later Ecopetrol. At the same time, a local culture of popular radicalism and social protest was maintained due to the presence of the oil workers union, left-wing political parties, and a progressive Catholic Church.

In response, since the start of the Cold War and even before, the Colombian state has first and foremost been concerned with questions of security in the Magdalena Medio. Right-wing paramilitary groups linked to the Colombian military first emerged in

¹¹ Ibid., 190, 192.

the Magdalena Medio in the early 1980s, provoking the massive displacement of peasants to Barrancabermeja and awakening urban social activists to the problem of political violence and the idea of human rights. The rise and spread of paramilitarism in the region occurred earlier than anywhere else in Colombia following the outbreak of guerrilla violence in the 1960s. Significantly, the direct ties between paramilitary and military forces is clearer here than in most other areas of Colombia. From the outset, paramilitary groups targeted left-wing political parties and social movements in areas of Marxist guerrilla influence, concentrating on the southern sub-region of the Magdalena Medio around the strategic towns of Puerto Berrío and Puerto Boyacá, and then proceeding north towards the radical centre of Barrancabermeja. They did not distinguish between social movements and left-wing insurgents. Later on, they would perceive human rights activists through the same Cold War lens.

The advent of human rights as a paradigm of social protest in Barrancabermeja occurred in response to a dirty war on social activists that claimed thousands of lives across Colombia. Human rights activism in the Magdalena Medio, which originated among peasants in areas hard-hit by paramilitary violence, was a direct response to the shifting needs of a vibrant but besieged network of social activists. It was therefore at once an attempt to save lives, defend existing popular movements, and shed light on state complicity with paramilitarism. Although political violence had been a fact of life for generations of Colombians, the rapid proliferation of illegal armed groups through the 1980s was unprecedented. Whereas earlier violence was related to political party affiliations, this new era was characterized by the targeting of social movements. The wider context that gave rise to human rights activism can be linked to national and

international political changes, especially the deepening of the Cold War in Colombia beginning in the 1960s, the breakdown of peace negotiations between the Colombian government and Marxist insurgents in the 1980s, and the increase in U.S. military assistance in the name of fighting a war on drugs. Locally, however, there were important continuities between human rights activists' responses to paramilitary violence in the late 1980s, and previous struggles led by of unionized oil workers, peasants and urban squatters. Barranca's diverse social activist groups organized *paros cívicos* to demand social services in the 1970s and human rights in the 1980s. Grassroots participation in social protest was assured from one era to the next by the Catholic Church (Pastoral Social), the National Association of Peasants (ANUC) and the *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO).

Rethinking Advocacy Networks

Human rights represent an important field of social and political struggle for progressive social movements, but do they provide a framework for real change? Francisco Campos, former secretary general of CREDHOS and spokesperson for the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* civil society coalition, says that human rights movements must encompass wider struggles for social and economic justice if they are to stay relevant. Human rights, he argues must be about more than the defence of civil and political rights:

I think that is a much distorted view, a narrow view of human rights. When one is able to understand the comprehensiveness of human rights, and fully commit oneself, ethically and morally, politically... Because the comprehensive defence of human rights is the defence of life, of dignity, of development, and of democracy.

I don't know what on earth could be more vanguardist than that.¹²

In order to understand the impact of human rights movements, this thesis has argued that it is essential to look into the local roots of human rights activism. Do human rights movements create new channels of popular participation? Do they encourage solidarity within communities and between diverse social and political actors? The history of the movement for human rights in the Magdalena Medio is a unique and illustrative case study that brings into clear focus the relationships that exist between social movements and human rights in a context of armed conflict.

The Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS) encouraged solidarity between diverse social movements around the principles of basic human rights. During the first few years of the dirty war in Barrancabermeja, CREDHOS helped to galvanize activists and ordinary citizens alike. Hundreds of people signed up to become members of CREDHOS, and individuals working with all of the main labour and social movement organizations in the region participated in CREDHOS' assemblies. After 1987 human rights became the number one reason for social protest in Colombia. Nowhere was this dynamic more apparent than in Barrancabermeja, where politically-motivated violence inspired local residents to take to the streets on a regular basis. However, this would never have been possible if not for the fact that the civic-popular movement in Barrancabermeja was reaching a peak in the late 1980s. When the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* was created in 1983 as a means of coordinating the work of activist groups on a permanent basis, it seemed as if forward momentum for social change had been achieved. Military-paramilitary repression

¹² Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, September 20, 2005)

undermined the capacity of Barranca's civic-popular movement to influence the national government. Perhaps more significantly, the dirty war of the 1980s was a threat to survival of Barranca's deeply-rooted popular radical political culture.

Many academics tell the history of human rights from the perspective of lawmakers and international organizations, oblivious to the origins and impact of human rights movements themselves within local and regional contexts. While local organizations appear as actors within Kathryn Sikkink's explanation of human rights activism, they are reduced to the status of enablers of transnational advocacy, where the real power to effect change is assumed to be located.¹³ Human rights activism may be "indexed" to political forces beyond the immediate control of local movements and NGOs, as historian Greg Grandin argues. However, it does not necessarily follow that human rights activists are mainly concerned with influencing international public opinion or persuading foreign governments to intervene to stop abuses. Indeed, while international organizations reported on and occasionally visited the Magdalena Medio through the 1980s, human rights activists in Barrancabermeja relied primarily on local social movements' capacity to rally citizens in protest in their efforts to pressure the Colombian government to enforce human rights and put a stop to paramilitary violence.

The potential effectiveness of the movement for human rights in the Magdalena Medio was proven very early on. *Barranqueños* participated in protests and mass funerals for the victims of political violence on a scale that recalled the landmark *paros cívicos* of 1963, 1975, 1977 and 1983. During the first year of its existence, CREDHOS convened national government officials to Barranca to partake in regional meetings,

¹³ Sikkink and Risse, "The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms," 22-35.

where *campesinos* denounced abuses taking place in isolated rural areas, where the presence of the national civilian government was weak. Almost as quickly, the movement's capacity to stem the violence was tested. In 1989 paramilitaries working with high-ranking regional military authorities struck a decisive blow against human rights by targeting the national government. The massacre of La Rochela demonstrated that social movements, not government officials, were going to have to take responsibility for monitoring and defending human rights.

The most influential studies of the history of human rights activism in Latin America focus on popular responses to military dictatorships in the southern cone countries of Argentina and Chile, rather than on areas of armed conflict.¹⁴ This has skewed the findings of political scientists and legal theorists towards readings of human rights that are mainly concerned with civil and political rights, and transitions to formal democracy. The focus of human rights activism in conflict areas such as Barrancabermeja is on saving lives and protecting spaces for social organizing and political debate. Groups such as CREDHOS, ANUC, the USO and others have for decades worked on ensuring that their constituencies are not deprived of what Yolanda Becerra describes as the right to breathe: the human energy needed to assemble, protest, and engage in dialogue with government authorities on a range of social and economic issues.¹⁵ Human rights activists in the Magdalena Medio have focussed on the reduction of violence in the context of advocating broader social change. In areas of armed

¹⁴ For an interesting comparison with Colombia in terms of understanding how human rights activists negotiate the rough terrain of armed conflict, see Coletta Youngers and Susan C. Peacock, "Peru's Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos: A Case Study of Coalition Building" (Washington, DC: Washington Office on Latin America, 2002).

¹⁵ Interview with author (March 10, 2006).

conflict, human rights work is a necessary corollary of social activism, and many organizations in Barranca consider it to be a central aspect of their overall work.¹⁶ If human rights activists in the Magdalena Medio were neutral or indifferent with respect to historical social struggles, they would invariably be less relevant, incapable of mobilizing public opinion, and therefore less effective.

By telling the story of human rights in transnational perspective many authors simply overlook the specific forms and content of protest that constitute the main thrust of human rights activism. In this dissertation I argue that if we look to local contexts, where frontline battles for human rights are fought, then we can develop new ways of thinking about the relationship between popular movements, human rights, and social change. Human rights activists in Barrancabermeja challenged U.S. military cooperation with Colombia directly, as evidenced by Jorge Gómez Lizarazo's lobbying work in Washington, D.C. They developed synergies between CREDHOS and groups such as Amnesty International and Peace Brigades International, and even received funding from the European Union. But the main functions of CREDHOS – popular education, documentation and denunciation through judicial authorities, municipal government and local media – all took place within the regional and national spheres. And none of these actions would have been enabled or given credence if not for the mobilization of ordinary citizens, manifested by the *paro cívico*. While a great deal of the work of defending human rights was carried out through the Colombian judicial system, the impetus behind CREDHOS was popular indignation about political violence. The groups that

¹⁶ Ramón Rangel (founding member of the Human Rights Commission of the *Unión Sindical Obrera*), interview with author, Barrancabermeja (December 18, 2006).

contributed to the establishment of CREDHOS feared that violence would undermine long-term popular movement struggles for social change.

One of the critiques levelled at human rights movements is that they are limited in their capacity to effect social change by virtue of being liberal and reformist, rather than radical and revolutionary. As Winifred Tate observes, some Colombian leftists have argued that human rights were a “bourgeois concept, originating in the West to strengthen the hegemony of the United States”.¹⁷ This is a similar critique put forward by legal scholar Makau Mutua, who has argued that human rights norms tend to favour individual rights over social and economic justice.¹⁸ This observation has important historical implications for the debate over human rights, globally.¹⁹ The rise of human rights activism and attempts to bring about change through human rights coincided in Barrancabermeja with a terrifying war of counterinsurgency in which civilians were the main targets. It is also true that movements that have proclaimed themselves revolutionary have often not been successful in bringing about revolutionary change, and have incited repression on members and people in the regions in which they work. The decline of the revolutionary option for social change in certain areas of Colombia did not coincide precisely with the fall of the Soviet Union. In Barrancabermeja, the degradation

¹⁷ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 101.

¹⁸ Mutua, *Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique*, 198.

¹⁹ As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the Algiers Declaration of the Rights of Peoples of 1976 was drafted by non-governmental activists as an assertion of collective rights, with an important emphasis on the right to self-determination of colonized peoples. Historically, the assertion of collective rights has been strongest by aboriginal peoples and left-wing movements, and the assertion of the right to self-determination has been strongest by ethnic minorities and in Africa. Issa G. Shivji, *The Concept of Human Rights in Africa* (London: Council for the Development of Economic and Social Research in Africa, CODESRIA, 1989), 99.

of the armed conflict since the late 1980s engendered a slowly waning idealism among social movement activists.²⁰

The broad-based popular social movements that organized around human rights principles in Barrancabermeja in the late 1980s were, in the words of founding member Rafael Gómez, on the “threshold” of an historic struggle. But what exactly was the nature of that struggle? Left-wing political movements in the Magdalena Medio throughout the twentieth century bequeathed local activists a revolutionary vision and language. Yet, at the same time, activists in Colombia’s oil capital were engaged directly in processes of political negotiation with the state. From the perspective of the unionized oil workers, peasants or urban squatters, there was no contradiction between negotiation and disruption, between reform and revolution.²¹ CREDHOS co-founder Jorge Gómez Lizarazo recalls feeling that the defence of human rights required a broad political strategy and that the legal defence of the victims of violence, in and of itself, was an insufficient approach:

A series of assassinations took place in the region, and demands around economic and social issues turned into demands around human rights. During the struggles of the 1970s there had been some detentions and abuses, some torture, but these were things that you could challenge from a legal point of view. But death – that required a movement.²²

So, while human rights movements called on the Colombian state to provide security for ordinary citizens in the midst of armed conflict, desist from supporting or abetting

²⁰ The phrase “degradation of the armed conflict” is commonly used in Colombia to describe the process of escalating violence against civilians since the late 1980s. See Pécaut, *Crónica de cuatro décadas*, 543.

²¹ Zamosc, “The Political Crisis,” 48.

²² Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

paramilitarism, and end impunity for abuses, they did so through legal means, backed by the force of mass civil disobedience.

Long before the term “human rights” entered the vernacular of social movement activists in Barranca, oil workers made rights claims on the Colombian state. Unionized workers withheld their labour and demanded recognition for freedom of association, representation and collective bargaining. In the early twentieth century Colombian workers did not have the legal right to strike, yet they were able to have a positive impact on national politics and expand the national social benefits regime.²³ Workers’ claims on labour rights were expressed more fully in Colombian law in the 1930s during the moderate reformist governments led by the Liberal Party. Because Tropical Oil was foreign-owned, strike actions by definition had important international dimensions as well, and the union developed a strong nationalist ideology. While many labour leaders espoused radical Marxist political beliefs, the battles fought during the era of Tropical Oil were mostly over basic civil rights. Similar dynamics continued through the era of national control. Following the 1977 strike in Barranca, the oil workers union declared: “That wasn’t a strike, it was a war!” Acts of sabotage were carried out against oil pipelines beginning in the early 1960s, though never in the name of the union. When they were arrested and dragged into military courts, oil workers offered legal arguments to demonstrate their innocence and the illegitimacy of the proceedings.

²³ “Even during the Conservative government certain rights were created... they created the first norms on workplace accidents (1915) and life insurance paid for by companies (1921 and 1922), established health assistance for official employees (1923) and Sundays off for all workers (1926) ...and consecrated the first laws on child labour (1929).” José Antonio Ocampo, ed., *Historia económica de Colombia* (Bogotá: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Fedesarrollo, 1987), 319.

The Legacy of Local Human Rights Movements

Human rights activists in Barrancabermeja have made enormously important contributions to interpretations of the Colombian conflict precisely because they understand the ways in which decisions are made by local actors. Their observation and documentation of political violence has elucidated the phenomenon of paramilitarism and the relationship between the state and private armed groups in Colombia. Debates around the possibilities and limitations of protecting human rights in the midst of armed conflict, particularly irregular armed conflict, has been pioneered by groups such as CREDHOS. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights of the United Nations, and other groups have produced a remarkable number of weighty analytical reports on Colombia. What is rarely stated, but bears mentioning here, is that these organizations *would have no analysis of the Colombian situation*, or the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or anywhere else for that matter where armed conflict appears inscrutable, without the analysis provided by frontline human rights defenders.

Human rights activism in conflict areas reflects the exigencies and pressures to which social movements in these areas are subject. The public *denuncias* or urgent actions issued by CREDHOS and other organizations in Barranca are calibrated to have a positive impact on events at the local level. From the outset, this has meant framing violations of human rights in a social and political context. Yolanda Becerra of the Popular Women's Organization (OFP) sums up this point eloquently:

I think that in Barranca we have been specialists in the definition and defence of human rights, conceptually and in practice. We have been quite creative, really,

in the methods we have used to defend human rights, we have had tremendous debates, analysis, to find solutions that fit each political moment, to know how to make effective denunciations... it used to be that our work was more political, more ideological, it reflected the way we thought, our analysis. Then we began working more on the basis of simply reporting the facts, so that it did not come across as biased... it has been a process, a dynamic, but what is most important I think is that no political crisis or conjuncture can be an excuse for not acting, despite everything we have been through.²⁴

As we shall see in the epilogue to this dissertation, it may be too early to judge the outcomes of armed conflict in Barrancabermeja, or the impact that armed conflict has on human rights activists, or vice versa. While CREDHOS was not able to stop the advance of paramilitarism, there are other ways in which it has been effective. For more than two decades, social activists in the Magdalena Medio have been subject to constant pressure from armed groups, mostly by paramilitary groups closely linked to the Colombian military. Yet they have survived to tell the tale and engage in important debates, local and international, about the ways in which human rights issues can be addressed in areas affected by armed conflict and counterinsurgency repression. Popular mobilization has been their greatest strength and source of creative energy in the face of violence

²⁴ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 10, 2006).

Epilogue

Surviving the Siege of Barrancabermeja

People in this city think they live in the centre of the universe. Many people say that peace in Colombia begins with the Magdalena Medio, begins with Barranca. That allows us to feel messianic, to build social processes, to crystallize our ideas. This messianic attitude has allowed us to dream in Barrancabermeja. Our life experiences, of solidarity, of liberation, of irreverence... these experiences of building a social network... these allow us to imagine the utopias and the proposals that we are advancing today.⁸²⁶

Régulo Madero, human rights activist, 2006

Introduction: *La Toma de Barrancabermeja*

In Barrancabermeja today, human rights activists face new forms of violence. Right wing paramilitary groups have occupied the city. The threats against social activists in Barranca are now delivered by text message (SMS) rather than mail. In the past decade, paramilitary troops in the city achieved recognition of their hegemony: they received clemency from the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez through a process of demobilization.⁸²⁷ President Uribe's Justice and Peace Law of 2005 offered reduced sentences for paramilitary commanders and immunity from prosecution for rank-and-file fighters. Some of the demobilized paramilitaries in Barranca have established NGOs such as Seeds for Peace, through which they claim to carry out human rights work and offer support for victims.⁸²⁸ Many officially demobilized "*paras*" in Barranca have

⁸²⁶ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

⁸²⁷ See Cynthia J. Arnson, ed., *The Peace Process in Colombia with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia-AUC* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, 2005).

⁸²⁸ Lesley Gill, "The Parastate in Colombia: Political Violence and the Restructuring of Barrancabermeja," *Anthropologica* 51 (2009), 9.

reformed, using names such as the “Black Eagles” that evoke the spectre of the death squads that operated in Colombia during *La Violencia*.⁸²⁹ The doctrine that guides current paramilitary actions – opposition to progressive social movements, leftists and other “subversives” – has not changed at all. This in spite of the fact that the Marxist guerrillas that once held the *barrios* of Barranca have fled and some former *milicianos* from the ELN and FARC have switched sides and joined the “*paras*”. Many former guerrillas and demobilized paramilitaries now participate in powerful new criminal organizations that deal in drugs and contraband gasoline.⁸³⁰ The adjustment for human rights activists has been quite literally overwhelming.

From a contemporary perspective, this chapter explores the social memories of dirty war and social activism in Colombia’s oil capital. The recent history of Barrancabermeja allows us to observe how human rights defenders working in conflict zones adapt to catastrophic shifts in the balance of power. Armed groups demonstrate that they are capable of adopting new strategies of repression and subterfuge in response to social and political change, even reinventing themselves. Are human rights defenders as flexible? How are the memories of past social movement struggles impacted by the paramilitary occupation and its attendant pressures? What is the relationship between historical memory and social movement responses to current events? And what do local activists have to tell us about the lessons they have learned from the past and their perspectives on the present and the future?

⁸²⁹ “*Aguila Negra*”, or Black Eagle, is mentioned as a common alias used by paramilitary fighters during the late period of *La Violencia*. Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants and Politics*, 85.

⁸³⁰ Thad Dunning and Leslie Wirpsa, “Oil and the Political Economy of Conflict in Colombia and Beyond: A Linkages Approach,” *Geopolitics* 9:4 (2004), 81-108.

Analyzing the period since 1993 in depth is beyond the reach of this dissertation. In this epilogue, I provide a brief overview of some signal developments in the ongoing struggle for Barrancabermeja over the past two decades. Perhaps more importantly, I convey reflections of Barranca's human rights activists on the enormous problems they face and the past and future of the social movements they advocate for.

On May 16, 1998 armed men drove into Barrancabermeja, proceeding unimpeded past a police checkpoint and then deep into the city's guerrilla-dominated southeastern *barrios*. Within an hour they killed seven people, and abducted another 25. This was the single boldest act of paramilitary violence ever committed in the city, and a message to local residents that the tide of history was turning. Over the next five days Barranca was gripped by the largest civic protests in a generation. More than 10,000 people attended the funeral for the victims whose bodies were recovered at the massacre site. Immediately after the funeral, large assemblies of people were held in the *Parque Infantil* in the centre of town and at the oil workers' union, while groups of young men and women set up barricades of burning tires at the traditional meeting place for *paros cívicos*, the *As de Copas*. The May 16, 1998 massacre ushered in an era of terror that would claim nearly 2,000 lives in just four years. By the end of 2001, the guerrillas that had held sway in Barrancabermeja's poor neighbourhoods for two decades were in full retreat. Whereas Barrancabermeja had once been a place of refuge for displaced *campesinos* from the countryside, people were now being displaced from the city or, within the city, from one *barrio* to another.⁸³¹ And the oldest and most vibrant social

⁸³¹ According to the Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), 1,195 people were displaced from Barrancabermeja in 2002. As cited in Felipe Osorio Viera

movements in all of Colombia were at risk. Human rights activists were targeted by paramilitaries with a ferocity reminiscent of the dirty war of the late 1980s.

The impact of the May 16, 1998 massacre and its aftermath on the city's popular social movements raises important questions about the outcomes of armed conflict in Colombia. No more so than for Barranca-based activists themselves. Not simply was Barrancabermeja the most violent city in Colombia from 1998 to 2002, but it experienced a profound political transformation during that time. The new reality of paramilitary dominance that began in 2001 has caused many activists to reflect on the losses suffered during one of Latin America's longest and bloodiest dirty wars. In my interviews with social movement leaders conducted in 2005-2007, many people relived the circumstances that gave rise to the crisis and asked tough questions about the way in which events unfolded. Our conversations were pulled time and again into the present, as we sought to make sense of the *toma de Barranca*, or the take-over of the city by paramilitary forces. How could we avoid it? Determined to renew the city's social movements, local activists believe they will have to learn from the past and rethink their expectations. First person accounts – textured by regret and disillusionment, as well as pride and hope – give us valuable insight into the possibilities and limitations of human rights organizing in this conflict zone. It is a way of accessing the hidden transcript, not just of resistance, of which there was a great deal, but of uncertainties that are present in the documentary

and Fabián Ramírez Villarreal, “Barrancabermeja: configuración territorial y conflicto social” (master's thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá 2004).

record, but often overlooked.⁸³² Through these interviews, we are witness to a process of coming to terms with loss of friends and colleagues, and of illusions.

Barranqueños display a strong sense of communal entitlement that is exceptional in a country where many communities and social movements have been devastated by decades of dirty war.⁸³³ In the current context, many individuals and groups are asking whether or not Barranca has exhausted its reserves. Many of the city's best and brightest have been killed or have left. Many others remain, of course, but under totally changed circumstances. The balance of power between the guerrilla and the military-paramilitary nexus has been upset in favour of the latter, and the paramilitaries have imposed serious restrictions on activists who are associated directly or indirectly with left-wing causes and on the population in general. As sociologist Martha Cecilia García writes: "In order to maintain control over the territory, the paramilitaries use networks of informants... and enforce a system of 'law'."⁸³⁴ Since 2003 "codes of conduct" for youth have appeared

⁸³² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁸³³ The best known example in Colombia is the destruction of the Patriotic Union (UP) political party. The killing of between 3,000 and 5,000 members of the UP between the creation of the party in 1985 and its official demise in 2002 has been described by some human rights scholars as a political genocide. There is a very small academic literature on the events surrounding the Patriotic Union. Andrei Gómez-Suárez, "Perpetrator blocs, genocidal mentalities, and geographies: the destruction of the Unión Patriótica in Colombia and its lessons for genocide studies," *Journal of Genocide Research* 9:4 (December 2009), 637-660.; Anniseh Van Engeland, "Failed Attempts: The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia and the Unión Patriótica," in *From Terrorism to Politics*, eds. Anniseh Van Engeland and Rachael M. Rudolph (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008); Suzanne Wilson and Leah A. Carroll, "The Colombian Contradiction: Lessons Drawn From Guerrilla Experiments in Demobilization and Electoralism," in *From Revolutionary Movements to Political Parties*, eds. Kalowatie Deonandan, David Close, and Gary Prevost (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

⁸³⁴ Martha Cecilia García V., "Barrancabermeja: ciudad en permanente disputa," in Mauricio Archila, et al., eds. *Conflicto, poderes e identidades en el Magdalena Medio, 1990-2001* (Bogotá: COLCIENCIAS, CINEP, 2006), 297.

on pamphlets signed by the paramilitaries.⁸³⁵ The culture of street protests has been dampened, yet popular movements remain committed to the same basic principles of social justice and human rights. Barranca is still an area of social conflict and political violence, and the outcomes of these processes remain unclear.

Human rights activists in Barranca continue to see themselves as agents of social change and carriers of a longstanding tradition of popular social and political activism. The tension between loss and defiance informs the way in which activists evaluate their own role in the crisis, as they ask themselves whether they could have made better decisions. In order to situate activists' experiences and reflections in a broader context, I make use of selected primary sources (e.g. judicial records, U.S. consular correspondence, and international human rights reports, as well as reporting on the situation in Barranca by local civil society organizations). I also draw on recent scholarly contributions, such as Colombian social scientists' and historians' analyses of the significance of Barranca and the personal accounts of foreign journalists and human rights researchers who have reflected on what is often referred to as the "degradation" of the Colombian conflict.⁸³⁶

⁸³⁵ Gill, "The Parastate in Colombia," 8.

⁸³⁶ The most important scholarly work discussing recent events in Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena Medio region is a 2006 volume of essays by Bogotá-based researchers associated with the Centre for Popular Research and Education, CINEP. See Mauricio Archila, et al., eds. *Conflicto, poderes e identidades*. See also Banco de Datos de Violencia Política, Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos and Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, "Barrancabermeja, la otra versión: paramilitarismo, control social y desaparición forzada, 2000-2003," *Noche y Niebla Caso Tipo No. 3* (Bogotá: CINEP/CREDHOS, 2004) and Lesley Gill, "Durable Disorder: Parapolitics in Barrancabermeja," *North American Congress on Latin America Report* 42:4 (July/August 2009), 20-24. Of special interest is the work of Franciscan priest Mario Rafael Toro Puerta, who lived several years in *Barrio Boston*, one of the poorest and most violence-affected neighbourhoods in Barranca. Mario Rafael Toro Puerta,

The Meaning of the May 16, 1998 Massacre

The paramilitary siege of Barrancabermeja began on the evening of Saturday, May 16, 1998. As previously mentioned, the killing and disappearance of 32 mostly young men from the poor *barrios* of Barranca's *suroriente* provoked a major crisis in the city, and a shocking realization among activists that they would have to change their approach to human rights work. The shock was comparable to that experienced by social activists during the first wave of political assassinations that took place in the city between 1985 and 1987. Although surrounded by violence, and working under conditions of tremendous stress, human rights activists in Barranca in 1998 did not imagine that the "*paras*" would attack with such brazen force in the heart of the city. As Frederic Jameson writes, such processes of coming to consciousness can be terrifying:

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness -- something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator's fall or in a sudden dip in an airliner. The latter recalls us to our bodies much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. The shock indeed is basic and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naïve position, there can be no question of any genuine dialectical coming to consciousness.⁸³⁷

In the days prior to the most devastating massacre in Barranca's history, a *calma chicha*, or tense calm, reigned over the city. Rumours had circulated amongst activists in the city that paramilitary groups were preparing an attack. Letters and phone calls had been made from CREDHOS and other groups to local military authorities, informing them of

O.F.M., *Pendientes de un hilo: El proceso de desafiliación en un sector de Barrancabermeja* (Bogotá: Editorial Bonaventuriana, 2004).

⁸³⁷ Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 308.

imminent danger. Even though the massacre was carried out within the logic of a broader paramilitary strategy, it was a kick in the teeth to the social activists, members of CREDHOS and others, who saw themselves as the defenders of human rights, the last line of protection for local citizens.

At 9:00 p.m. on May 16, three trucks carrying approximately 40 heavily armed men dressed in black and green military fatigues, their heads covered to conceal their identities, drove past an army patrol at the southern entrance to Barranca. Known to locals as “*el Retén*”, or “the Roadblock”, this is a strategic point where the highways heading east to Bucaramanga and south to Bogotá converge. The trucks continued along the main thoroughfare leading into the city and stopped at a popular roadside bar. Upon entering the *Estadero La Tora*, they turned up the lights and turned off the music. Two people were seized and taken away. The trucks proceeded back to “*el Retén*”, stopping briefly at another bar located across the street from the army post. The trucks then turned around and took a hard right turn into the *suroriente*, a sprawling low-income district known as a stronghold of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). The paramilitaries arrived at the soccer field that serves as the main plaza or meeting place in the area, where a large party was underway. Most of the people in attendance were teenagers from the vicinity. The men jumped down from the trucks, brandishing guns and shouting, and started rounding people up, separating the men and boys from the women and girls. Eyewitnesses reported that amongst the attackers was at least one person in civilian clothes, her face covered by a hood, who helped identify specific individuals from a list

of names.⁸³⁸ Seven people were killed and 25 people abducted in less than one hour. Around 10:00 p.m. the men got back onto the trucks and left by the same route by which they had come. They passed “*el Retén*” and drove out on the main highway in the direction of Bucaramanga.

According to Sergeant Mario Alberto Fajardo Garzón, who was in charge of the army unit stationed at “*el Retén*” that night, his troops were in place until 9:30 p.m., at which time they were called to return to the main army base located several kilometres away.⁸³⁹ They had noticed nothing untoward the entire evening, only a few trucks, a car, a few motorcycles, and an armoured truck belonging to the national police. No vehicles had been stopped or searched. A small permanent military post known as “*Pozo 7*”, or “oil well number 7”, is located a few hundred metres from where the massacre took place, on the beltway road that connects the *suroriente* to the *nororiente*. The two military control points are located at the two main points of entry into the district, making it difficult for anyone to believe that a large truck of paramilitaries could go unobserved.

The head of the National Police in Barranca, Lieutenant Colonel Joaquín Correa López, said that he first received reports of a disturbance in one of the city’s outlying *barrios* at about 11:00 p.m. Lt. Colonel Correa was the commander not just of Barranca, but of all national police present in the area covered by the *Comando Operativo Especial*

⁸³⁸ The practice of using *informantes encapuchados*, or hooded informants, was later put to use by the Colombian military during the 2002 assault on the *Comuna 13* neighbourhood in Medellín. The *Comuna 13* was considered one of the last bastions of leftist militia influence in Colombia’s second largest city. Banco de Datos de Violencia Política, Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular and Justicia y Paz, “La comuna 13: la otra versión,” *Noche y Niebla Caso Tipo No. 2* (Bogotá: CINEP/Justicia y Paz, 2003), 20.

⁸³⁹ Comisión Especial Disciplinaria, Procuraduría de la Nación, Bogotá (December 7, 1998), 47. CEJIL Archives, Washington, D.C.

del Magdalena Medio, including 27 *municipios* well-known as areas of both paramilitary and guerrilla presence. Later, in an interview with investigators from the Attorney General's office sent from Bogotá, Lt. Colonel Correa said that he did not respond to these reports because he feared they might be false alarms made by the guerrillas in order to lure police into an ambush.⁸⁴⁰ The police only entered Barranca's poor *barrios* in armoured vehicles, mainly out of fear of being shot at by the guerrillas. As Lt. Colonel Correa put it, after all that the police had done to help the people of Barranca, he was not going to lead his men into a trap.⁸⁴¹

The investigation conducted by the office of the Attorney General in May 1998 concluded that Barranca's police commander had received timely and detailed information about the massacre. At 10:30 p.m. several relatives of the victims of the massacre were already at National Police headquarters, located on the opposite side of town. They gave detailed reports of what had just transpired and requested immediate assistance. But Lt. Colonel Correa did not respond. No police were mobilized to investigate, secure the area, or pursue the fleeing perpetrators.⁸⁴² The commander filed no reports on May 16, 1998 and made no phone calls to other security forces in the area. No coroner was summoned to the scene. In the end, the bodies of six people were picked up by family members and neighbours and transported to funeral homes in central Barranca.⁸⁴³ One funeral home owner called the police in the small hours of the morning to see if they were aware of what had just transpired.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52.

Just before sunrise on May 17, CREDHOS president Osiris Bayter Ferias was called at her home by the owners of *Funeraria la Foronda*. When Bayter arrived, wearing the t-shirt she had slept in, she was sought after by the victims' families, embraced, and entreated to deliver justice. Bayter was at the time the most recognizable figure in the city's civic popular movement and the soul of CREDHOS. One long-time friend and colleague observed: "Osiris is an extraordinary woman. She is magic. *Tiene mística*. She has a commitment inside of her. Because she loves her people, she loves her struggle, she is sincere and brave".⁸⁴⁴ Raised in the *barrios nororientales* of Barranca, Bayter's father was a former oil worker who had been sacked by Ecopetrol along with dozens of his comrades following the great strike of 1963. Her parents, both of *costeño* origin, spoke passionately about the struggles of Colombian working peoples and followed politics closely. Bayter often wore her emotions and her politics on her sleeve. In the hours and days that followed, she would act as spokesperson for the people of Barranca to the national journalists and government officials who descended on the city to investigate the massacre.

Osiris Bayter accused the Colombian military of responsibility for massacre. Her boldness would provoke a terrible backlash. Less than one month following the massacre, Bayter fled the country under threats of death. The paramilitaries that claimed responsibility for the massacre sent a death threat addressed to Bayter and the president of the oil workers union, Hernando Hernández: "Conscious of the grave harm that you, Osiris Bayter, are causing with your work which benefits the guerrilla and in detriment to Human Rights we are telling you that we have decided to declare you a military target as

⁸⁴⁴ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

well as Mr. Hernando Hernández Pardo, President of the USO”.⁸⁴⁵ The remaining team of CREDHOS *promotores*, or human rights promoters, had to take over where Bayter left off, sorting out the case against the Colombian state and lobbying on behalf of the victims’ families. Though not as well known as Bayter, they were experienced activists in their own right. But the pressure continued to mount, as rumours swirled around the city’s popular movement, and death threats were issued against CREDHOS in the name of the paramilitary group that claimed responsibility for the massacre, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Santander y Sur de Cesar* (AUSAC).⁸⁴⁶ CREDHOS’ activities in the rural *municipios* of San Pablo and Cantagallo, both in southern Bolívar, had to be closed by the end of the year. Over the next three years, seven CREDHOS staff abandoned the region. Several would return to Barranca, only to be forced to leave again. While some did manage to stay in Barranca, they eventually quit CREDHOS. The organization was gravely weakened by the departure of experienced staff members, and the concomitant loss of institutional memory.

Government investigations into the events of May 16, 1998 in Barranca began within one week of the events. Despite this prompt response, few results were forthcoming. Liberal President Ernesto Samper was preparing to leave office, and Conservative President-elect Andrés Pastrana was consumed by preparations for the first peace talks with the FARC in more than a decade. This unfortunate set of circumstances meant that there was little political will to move the Barranca case forward. National

⁸⁴⁵ As quoted in Amnesty International, *Barrancabermeja: A City Under Siege* (London: Amnesty International, 1999), 20.

⁸⁴⁶ According to political scientist Mauricio Romero, the AUSAC were formed around 1995 in response to FARC activities northeast of Barrancabermeja. Romero, *Parapolítica: la ruta de la expansión paramilitar*, 357, 363.

Peace Commissioner José Noé Ríos flew to Barranca on behalf of the Samper government. But when Ríos appeared on the balcony of Barranca's City Hall to address the thousands of protestors who had come to greet him, there was a sense of despair and anger among many local activists who were accustomed to receiving high-level government officials in response to human rights protests, to little effect. The feeling of impotence was excruciating. The protestors chanted: *¡vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!* They took them alive! We want them back alive! *¡El pueblo lo dice y tiene la razón – militares y paramilitares, la misma mierda son!* The people say it, the people are right – the army and the paramilitary are the same shit! It was rumoured that the 25 people abducted on May 16 were being held at a nearby farm.⁸⁴⁷ The military or police only had to drive a few kilometres up the road toward Bucaramanga to investigate. Yet nothing was done.

The Paramilitary Takeover of Barranca

The final assault on the city had been foretold. One of the most famous phrases ever attributed to Carlos Castaño, former leader of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia, or *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC), was his intention to sit in a

⁸⁴⁷ Ten years after the massacre, details about the fate of the 25 people disappeared from Barranca are starting to emerge. In May of 2008 the remains of six of the victims were found in a rural area of San Rafael de Lebrija, in the department of Santander near Bucaramanga, by representatives of the Colombian Attorney General's Office. Manuel Navarro, "Hallan primeros rastros de desaparecidos en masacre de desde hace 10 años en Barrancabermeja," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), May 15, 2008. In March of 2009 a demobilized paramilitary known by the alias Picúa tearfully confessed to a hearing of the government-run Justice and Peace Tribunal in Bucaramanga to having participated in the killing of the six victims whose bodies were located in San Rafael de Lebrija, the only victims accounted for thus far. "Detalles nunca revelados de la masacre de 16 de mayo en Barrancabermeja," *Vanguardia Liberal* (Bucaramanga, Santander), March 22, 2009.

hammock and drink a cup of coffee in Barranca's northeastern *barrios* by Christmas 2001.⁸⁴⁸ The AUC was a national umbrella organization for right-wing paramilitary forces across Colombia, established in 1997. Prior to the May 16, 1998 massacre, AUC leader Carlos Castaño had no known direct involvement in the Magdalena Medio region. It is unlikely that Castaño ever visited Barranca, let alone put his feet up to drink a triumphant cup of *tinto* in the former guerrilla stronghold, but Castaño clearly identified Barranca as one of the most important battlegrounds for the AUC. The AUC saw Barranca as important because it was the capital of Colombia's oil industry and because it was a major ELN stronghold. In the book-length interview with Castaño published in 2001 titled *Mi confesión: Carlos Castaño revela sus secretos*, the paramilitary commander describes winning the war against the guerrillas "block by block", beginning with Barranca's commercial district.⁸⁴⁹

Carlos Castaño describes the siege of Barrancabermeja as having been carried out in two stages: the enforced cooptation of the city's commercial centre, followed by a dirty war in the city's poor *barrios*. Castaño first sought to seize control of the protection racket run by the guerrillas in Barranca's *comercio* and then set about to demoralize the residents of guerrilla-dominated working class districts through massacres, targeted killings and threats. Neither task would prove simple. According to Castaño the guerrillas had achieved a high level of penetration into the daily commercial life of the city. But as more and more shopkeepers and businesspeople accepted the paramilitaries' protection, a tipping point was reached, and the guerrillas lost control over an essential

⁸⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Informe anual de 2001: eventos de 2000* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000). http://www.hrw.org/spanish/inf_anual/2001/colombia.html

⁸⁴⁹ Castaño, *Mi confesión*, 256.

support network.⁸⁵⁰ Overturning guerrilla influence in the eastern *barrios* of the city would be an entirely different matter. Defeating the guerrillas on their turf was less a question of winning hearts and minds, and more a question of bloodshed:

That is how we gained trust and credibility with decent people [*la gente buena*]. Afterwards we recuperated the *barrios nororientales* block by block. There the urban war between the Self-Defence Forces [AUC] and the guerrillas was fought with pistols, rifles and 45 millimeter grenades. Tremendous battles were fought in the *barrios*, we even went into the homes of *milicianos* to seize them.⁸⁵¹

Castaño is quoted as saying that about 100 members of guerrilla militia were killed in the first few years of the battle for control of Barranca. He then adds: “Between two and three executions every week. For sure. Counting those who really were subversives”.⁸⁵²

Carlos Castaño never made a claim as to how many non-combatants were killed, nor does he offer a precise definition of what he means by *subversivo*. He did claim that the architect of the May 16 massacre, AUSAC leader Camilo Morantes, was executed for being overzealous and killing “everything that smelled like the guerrillas”.⁸⁵³ The alleged execution of Morantes was first reported to the Colombian press in 2000, at a time when Castaño sought to demonstrate the steadiness and legitimacy of his command over the AUC. Castaño was also trying to demonstrate that the AUC was autonomous of the Colombian security forces. The AUC commander’s ability to exercise discipline over his sub-commanders was thus meant to demonstrate that he was in control. Morantes, a former FARC guerrilla, was expendable.

⁸⁵⁰ For a discussion of the concept of enforced protection, see Bedoya, “Seguridad y ciudadanía en los 90 en Medellín,” 90.

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*, 256.

Former CREDHOS president Jorge Gómez Lizarazo returned to Barranca in 2002 after 10 years in exile to take the job of Regional Human Rights Ombudsman, or *Defensor del Pueblo*. Coming from an activist background, Gómez was in an excellent position to observe the dynamics of paramilitary control in the city. His understanding of the AUC's strategy is, not surprisingly, more complete than that offered by Castaño. As Jorge Gómez suggests, the paramilitary project that "took over" Barranca relied equally on firepower, enforced protection rackets, new criminal activity for financial profit, and the cooptation of local political power. Gómez Lizarazo also raises the important question of what part the guerrillas played in their own downfall:

One has to be very critical of the guerrillas, because the guerrillas committed many errors, tactical and strategic errors, in military operations. The paramilitaries took control of Barrancabermeja in the second semester of 2001. The paramilitaries began as a strategy of the drug dealers, the army and the landowners, so they are necessarily economic, political and military... those are the self-defence groups we have today. The paramilitary take control of territory militarily, but also from social, political and economic points of view. So they begin to control the flow of gasoline, they start to control drug trafficking, they control the selling of coca paste coming out of the south of the department of Bolívar, they begin extorting businesses and industries, they extort contract workers for the city and for Ecopetrol, and they create in this way an economic empire of great proportions. Their project also entails control over the political sphere, financing political campaigns.⁸⁵⁴

The paramilitaries achieved their goal of taking over Barranca and forcing the guerrillas into retreat by late 2000. What followed was a bloodbath, and over the next year the paramilitaries carried out a "*limpieza*" or political cleansing of the city. The process of political extirpation – of leftists and social activists – is still being carried out. As of

⁸⁵⁴ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

2010 paramilitary killings were still taking place in Barranca, and social activists were continuing to receive death threats.⁸⁵⁵

Social Movements Respond to the Paramilitary Occupation

The paramilitarization of Barranca entailed disastrous consequences for social activists. In the words of Yolanda Becerra, long-time president of the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP) and human rights activist: “In this country, whoever has the power and the guns, has the people. We do not have the guns or the people. We are in crisis. I would say that in Colombia there really are no social movements left.”⁸⁵⁶ The last major *paro cívico* in Barranca was the five-day protest organized in the aftermath of the May 16, 1998 massacre. In May 1999 an “International Opinion Tribunal” was organized by civil society groups and solidarity committees in Canada. Witnesses to the massacre were flown from Barrancabermeja to Montreal and Toronto to give testimony to the judges who volunteered to overhear the case.⁸⁵⁷ In 2004 the legal case against the Colombian state for its complicity in the events of May 16, 1998 was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights.⁸⁵⁸ In spite of the

⁸⁵⁵ In November of 2009 Amnesty International reported that a Barranca-based member of the human rights group Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) received a threatening text message on her mobile phone that read: “Ms. Luz Almanza this is to let you know that you as representative of the organization which you are leading are declared a military target, sincerely Self Defence Forces”. Amnesty International, “Human Rights Defender’s Life in Danger” Colombia (November 27, 2009), UA: 319/09 Index: AMR 23/029/2009.

⁸⁵⁶ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 10, 2006).

⁸⁵⁷ Banco de Datos, “Barrancabermeja, la otra versión,” 120.

⁸⁵⁸ Center for Justice and International Law, “Comisión Interamericana admite denuncia contra Colombia por la masacre del 16 de mayo de 1998 en Barrancabermeja,” press release, Washington, D.C. (October 27, 2003). CEJIL Archives, Washington, D.C.

concern that the paramilitary takeover of Barranca has generated, it has been a challenge for social activists and victims of violence to maintain hope that justice will be done.

To the extent that the level of popular participation in protests is an important measure of the strength of the civic-popular movement, we can speak of a period of contraction. As Yolanda Becerra's comments illustrate, there were tremendous feelings of loss amongst many who had spent their entire adult lives building organizational processes. The case of the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP), which Becerra led for more than two decades, is an important illustration. The OFP is by far the largest social movement organization in Barrancabermeja. Established by the *Pastoral Social* of the Catholic diocese of Barrancabermeja in 1972 as Homemakers' Clubs, the OFP has been independent since 1987.⁸⁵⁹ In the 1990 the OFP grew beyond the city of Barrancabermeja, establishing community kitchens, educational programs and small community centres in several *municipios* along the Magdalena River. Despite feeling threatened and harassed by paramilitaries, the OFP has continued to expand its activities in the Magdalena Medio region, and indeed in Barranca. It even established a centre in Bogotá to work with displaced women in the Colombian capital. Becerra herself has survived numerous threats, but in 2007 was obliged to relocate to Bucaramanga for the safety of herself and her family.⁸⁶⁰

The persistence of politically-motivated violence in Barrancabermeja, years after paramilitaries allegedly pacified the city, suggests that the battle of Barranca has not ended. All of the main social movements in Barranca survived the paramilitarization of

⁸⁵⁹ *Clubes de amas de casa*

⁸⁶⁰ Claudia Ruíz, "Yolanda Becerra, colombiana ganadora del Premio Ginetta Sagan, Amnistía Internacional, 2009," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá), March 27, 2009.

the city in one form or another, and some have actually expanded their spheres of influence in surprising ways. David Ravelo, current president of CREDHOS and former municipal councillor on behalf of the Communist Party (PCC), tried to strike a hopeful note during our interview in 2005: “Here in the city we have a long and important accumulated history and important democratic reserves”.⁸⁶¹ The ethos and discourse of defiance is indeed still very much in evidence in the city and the Magdalena Medio. Marco Tulio Torres, a physical education teacher who represented CREDHOS in the small town of San Pablo, in the department of Bolívar, was interviewed by Canadian documentary filmmakers in December 1998, just a few weeks before he and the local parish priest had to leave town due to death threats: “I have not given up anything [to the paramilitaries]. I still have hope... I have not given up anything”.⁸⁶²

CREDHOS continues to perform many vital functions of human rights documentation and advocacy and has even taken on new projects, despite the fact that tensions in the city have increased and CREDHOS activists continue to be subject to threats and intimidation.⁸⁶³ One of the most important new initiatives assumed by CREDHOS is their work with the national Movement of Victims of State Crimes, or the *Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado*, established in 2004 to document and advocate on behalf of the victims of violence opposed to government-led

⁸⁶¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 10, 2006).

⁸⁶² “In the Company of Fear”, DVD, directed by Velcrow Ripper (1999, Vancouver, Canada: Reel-Myth Productions, 2007).

⁸⁶³ Amnesty International, “Fear for safety/ Death threats: COLOMBIA David Ravelo Crespo (m), Secretary General of the Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (CREDHOS), Regional Human Rights Corporation” February 26, 2008. AI Index: AMR 23/008/2008 UA 52/08.

“truth and reconciliation” efforts involving demobilized paramilitaries.⁸⁶⁴ In 2005 CREDHOS hosted a regional gathering of victims of paramilitary violence that was attended by 700 people from around the Magdalena Medio, as well as representatives of 22 regional, national and international organizations.⁸⁶⁵ CREDHOS also moved its headquarters from a small, poorly ventilated office across from the city’s central marketplace to a more secure location in a two-story house situated on a major avenue, complete with bright meeting spaces and a backyard garden. At the same time, security concerns persist. As of 2005, several members of the organization have armed bodyguards, who often are often stationed in front of the office in an armoured SUV.

One of the main reasons CREDHOS has been able to move on, expand its work in certain ways and take on new initiatives is that since 2003 all of the main members of CREDHOS are new. CREDHOS’ entire staff and Board of Directors resigned following the organization’s 2003 General Assembly, partly in response to the constant threats against veteran members of the organization, and partly out of internal disagreements about the surest way forward for the organization. As former CREDHOS secretary general Francisco Campos explains, CREDHOS entered a period of internal crisis during the final paramilitary push into the city. A number of prominent individual members were displaced from Barranca due to threats, and debates emerged as to how to rebuild the organization. Campos recalls that some of the more experienced people within CREDHOS proposed to articulate a vision of human rights that was less focused on

⁸⁶⁴ Guillermo Hoyos Vásquez, *Las víctimas frente a la búsqueda de la verdad y la reparación en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Instituto Goethe, Instituto de Estudios Sociales y Culturales Pensar, 2007).

⁸⁶⁵ Agencia Prensa Rural, “Se realizó el encuentro regional del Movimiento de Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado en el Magdalena Medio”, December 19, 2005. <http://www.colectivodeabogados.org/Se-realizo-el-encuentro-regional>

denouncing violence, and more focused on the themes of peace and social justice.

According to Campos, this shift signified an attempt to recognize the links between social movement activism and human rights. In his words, “making proposals” about ways to end the violence would be more productive than simply counting the dead. By Campos’ account, this was an attempt to recapture the spirit of the broad-based protest culture that flourished in the years prior to the dirty war. But to some, it may have seemed more like caution. In any case, the adjustment proved too contentious, and a new group of people emerged who wanted to run the organization. Campos reflects: “There were internal problems [*despelotes*], and contradictions, which were resolved when we finally decided to leave CREDHOS”.⁸⁶⁶

The *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja* also entered into crisis soon after the paramilitary occupation of the city, and it was dissolved in 2003. In terms of major shifts in local social movement organizing, this has to be counted as the most significant change of the paramilitary era. For 20 years the *Coordinadora Popular* had served as a civil society coalition that grouped together all of the city’s major unions and social movements. The *Coordinadora Popular* had what *barranqueños* call *capacidad de convocatoria*, or the power to convene the local population to protests. As former *Coordinadora Popular* spokesperson Evangelina Marín explained in an interview in 2004: “The *Coordinadora Popular*, all modesty aside, could convene popular assemblies, which meant 10,000 to 15,000 people in front of the USO [union building] or in the

⁸⁶⁶ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, September 20, 2005).

Parque Infantil'.⁸⁶⁷ The decision on the part of *Coordinadora Popular* members to turn the page meant that Barranca's social movements would have to create new mechanisms for sharing information on an ongoing basis.

In 2003 a new civil society coalition emerged that focused specifically on human rights. The *Espacio de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de Derechos Humanos del Magdalena Medio* was set up by a group of unions and social movements, including the *Pastoral Social*, CREDHOS, the oil workers union, the *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP) and others. What is perhaps most significant about the *Espacio* is it recognizes that a diversity of groups have been working on human rights issues in the city.⁸⁶⁸ Human rights protection is not just the role of CREDHOS, but has become a mainstream aspect of the work of all social and labour organizations. The new human rights coalition differs from the *Coordinadora Popular* in that it is not a civic movement dedicated to addressing a broad range of issues. The *Espacio* was conceived as a point of convergence around human rights, understood mainly in terms of monitoring and denouncing political violence in the Magdalena Medio region. Unlike the *Coordinadora Popular*, the *Espacio* was not meant to be a vehicle for the organization of public

⁸⁶⁷ Vladimir Carrillo and Tom Kucharz, *Colombia: Terrorismo de estado. Testimonios de la guerra sucia contra los movimientos populares* (Barcelona: Icaro Editorial, 2006), 352.

⁸⁶⁸ Amongst the founding members of the "*Espacio*" were a number of established groups, including the Pastoral Social - Diócesis de Barrancabermeja, Organización Femenina Popular - OFP, Comité Regional para los Derechos Humanos - CREDHOS, Central Unitaria de Trabajadores - CUT, Asociación Campesina del Valle Cimitarra - ACVC, and the Unión Sindical Obrera - USO, as well as several relatively new groups, including the Asociación Regional Víctimas de la Violencia en el Magdalena Medio - ASORVIN, and Asociación de Desplazados del Municipio de Barrancabermeja – ASODESAMUBA.

protests.⁸⁶⁹ The major benefit of the “*Espacio*” was that individual organizations under pressure from paramilitaries in their daily activities would benefit from issuing joint statements and engaging collectively in public debate, and share information about the security concerns of people living in different parts of the region. Indeed, the individual organizations who comprise the *Espacio* have continued to publish press releases and speak to local media about specific human rights concerns.

Veterans of the city’s social movements, those who have left Barranca and those who remain, have found themselves in the position of reflecting on the personal and collective losses suffered during the previous decades. One such leader is Ángel Tolosa, former president of the Independent Sector of Colombia’s National Association of Peasants (ANUC). Tolosa has lived in Bogotá since the late 1980s, although he remains in close contact with friends and family in Barranca and therefore deeply concerned with local affairs. In his view, political violence has caused the depoliticization of the struggle for human rights. Human rights is now narrowly defined in humanitarian terms, saving lives, rather than in terms of an agenda for social and political change. Tolosa explains:

Before the work was more open. I think that there was also more extensive educational work. And then all of a sudden things got so much more specialized, more focused. I think it was broader before. Maybe a bit careless too. Now CREDHOS does the same kind of work that other human rights organizations do, which I question, because it is very much centred on humanitarian assistance, they do not go beyond condemnation and humanitarian assistance. It would be worthwhile if human rights organizations did more systematic work, confronting real problems. For example, one very serious problem in the Magdalena Medio that they could confront is the eviction [of peasants] from the land. People are saying that there are a lot of evictions occurring, but we do not know how many.

⁸⁶⁹ Subsequently another civil society initiative was launched, under the rubric of the *Foro Social de Barrancabermeja y el Magdalena Medio*. Inspired by the global phenomenon known as the World Social Forum, the *Foro Social* brought all sectors of civil society together to share information, develop proposals for local development, comment on government policy, and coordinate protests and other public activities.

What concrete actions are being taken to respond to these evictions? While it may seem contradictory, I believe that human rights organizations have to take on structural problems in some way. This kind of work that has to do with food security and sovereignty, the defense of our collective community legacy, maybe it seems like it does not have much to do with human rights, but deep down it does. Human rights should not only be contestatory and humanitarian but also preventative. They could be organizing more in terms of the themes that social organizations work on, thinking about the short, medium and long-term.⁸⁷⁰

Human rights, says the former peasant leader, who now works for *Planeta Paz*, a high-profile national organization dedicated to training, research and developing collaboration among different social movements, must be an “integral” struggle, where issues such as land rights and economic justice are all articulated, linked and defended.

Interestingly, Ángel Tolosa’s ideas for revitalising human rights struggles in the Magdalena Medio coincide with the conception of human rights that was first espoused by CREDHOS in the late 1980s. Francisco Campos was among the activists who took up leadership positions within CREDHOS after the attempt to annihilate CREDHOS by the Colombian navy in the early 1990s, and who survived the *toma paramilitar* in the late 1990s. Like Tolosa, Campos argues that what is needed is a return to a more comprehensive definition of human rights:

When you internalize human rights, you understand the comprehensive nature of human rights, and you promote them in that way... when human rights are reduced to the simple defense of civil and political rights, then the critics are probably right. When human rights are just about the number of dead people, they remain at the level of the denunciation and not much more than that.⁸⁷¹

Francisco Campos’s personal trajectory led him from the student movement in Barranca, to university in Bogotá, and back to Barranca. Before joining CREDHOS, he served as a municipal councillor in the neighbouring *municipio* of Sabana de Torres. In the mid

⁸⁷⁰ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005).

⁸⁷¹ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, September 20, 2005).

1990s he was forced to leave Sabana de Torres when the mayor, a member of the Patriotic Union, was murdered.⁸⁷² Later on, Campos served as co-chair of the *Coordinadora Popular de Barrancabermeja*. His understanding of the “comprehensive” or interconnected nature of human rights work and social activism is thus derived from his education in Barranca and his experiences of participation in popular protest and progressive political causes.

The idea of a return to the principles of openness and pluralism was repeated by many former CREDHOS members during the interviews I conducted for this dissertation. Rafael Gómez, a former oil workers union leader and one of the co-founders of CREDHOS, suggests that CREDHOS is simply no longer in a position to throw its doors open to the wider community. How can you create democratic spaces in the midst of pervasive paramilitary pressure? As Gómez explains, significant changes may have to be made to the way in which groups like CREDHOS are structured:

This is a 20 year history. CREDHOS is in the hearts of many people; it is a name that remains in many people’s hearts. In 1988 we were so democratic that we left a very wide opening. But now there are other people representing CREDHOS... The people in the *barrios* still speak about CREDHOS, many people ask me about CREDHOS. So I think that CREDHOS has to take the next step, look at its structure, to get back to the values we had at the time.⁸⁷³

⁸⁷² Between 1992 and 1997 CREDHOS was represented in Sabana de Torres by Mireya and Mario Calixto, both schoolteachers and social activists. When paramilitaries issued death threats against Mario Calixto in 1997, he prepared to leave town. Mario’s departure was hastened when in December 1997 two armed tried to abduct him from his home. While the two men spoke with members of Peace Brigades International, a human rights organization whose foreign volunteers provided accompaniment to Mario and his family, Mario ran out the back door and hid. He left later that day for Barranca, a few days later for Bogotá, and soon thereafter for Spain. Peace Brigades International, “Attempted Assassination of Human Rights Defender Mario Calixto; PBI Volunteers at Risk,” Peace Brigades International (December 24, 1997).

⁸⁷³ Interview with author (Bogotá, September 27, 2005)

Partly nostalgic, this is a vision of social movement activism that has been reinforced by generations of *barranqueños*. Social memories of unity remain strong in Barranca for activists who lament the contraction of the civic-popular movement and regret the way in which armed groups have seized the agenda in recent years.

Can Human Rights Be Reclaimed?

One of the main issues being examined in retrospect by Barranca activists is the role that Marxist guerrilla groups in the city – principally the ELN and FARC – played in the closing-down of political space. The final offensive undertaken by the paramilitaries and security forces seemed to push the guerrillas into a corner. But before they retreated from the city, the guerrillas became engaged in a war against *sapos*, or informants. The confidence that many *barranqueños* had previously felt in the guerrillas slowly drained away. It was a disastrous process of disarticulation of the guerrillas' urban militias, and stories of individual *milicianos* who changed sides and joined the paramilitaries abound.

As former CREDHOS member and high school teacher Irene Villamizar reflects:

The guerrillas lost their way. The guerrillas lost sight of the interests of the people... and their own interests. In the end, the guerrillas were very cruel. The only thing that they have done in this neighbourhood is change their uniforms. The paramilitary occupation, it is a degenerated version of the guerrillas. Here it was not like in other parts of the country where outsiders came. No, here those who were guerrillas one day were paramilitaries the next. It is very sad.⁸⁷⁴

During the final days of guerrilla influence in Barranca, insurgent organizations even attacked one another. For instance, in 1999 at the height of the violence, the FARC

⁸⁷⁴ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006)

carried out a series of murders of urban members of the much-smaller, Maoist-inspired *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL).⁸⁷⁵

The grassroots work done by social movements in Barranca had been under siege for more than a decade prior to the final paramilitary offensive. Thinking historically, we can suggest one of the factors that facilitated the paramilitary incursion into the city was the decline of grassroots social processes relative to the armed power of guerrilla groups. By the end of 2001 the guerrillas had no more armed presence in the city. For the first time since urban militia were established by the ELN in the 1980s, Colombian police and military personnel could patrol the streets of the *barrios orientales* on foot. In the very same *barrios*, the paramilitaries imposed a code of conduct on residents and carried out killings, in an attempt to reorder existing social networks. Régulo Madero, who served as CREDHOS president from 1998-2005, reflects on the future of Barranca's social movements in a post-guerrilla scenario:

In the year 2001 many social movement organizations were waiting for the guerrillas to return, and I think that some are still waiting. But what we need to do is build on the experiences of the 1970s and the early 1980s... we need to develop our own organizational proposals, proposals for peace, citizenship and human security. Social organizations today are in flux... it is very important because public space has been affected, has been violated by armed actors, by the army, by the police, by the paramilitaries, and by all the guerrilla organizations.⁸⁷⁶

Just as the *paros cívicos* had become more spontaneous and disorganized, making room for the guerrillas to exert themselves publicly through *paros armados*, the paramilitaries took advantage of the confusing and paranoid environment in which the guerrillas operated. Paramilitary and military actions carried out against *barrio* residents and social leaders had provoked that confusion in the first place.

⁸⁷⁵ González and Jiménez, *Las guerras del Magdalena*, 99.

⁸⁷⁶ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

The *Organización Femenina Popular* (OFP) was one of the organizations hardest hit by the May 16, 1998 massacre. Yolanda Becerra, president of the OFP, recalls the pain that brought people together after May 16. In the days following the massacre, a large public assembly was held at which local activists decided to build 25 coffins to dramatize the disappearance of 25 people. The coffins were painted white and carefully marched through the streets, before being laid in front of the headquarters of the oil workers union. The challenge, she says, has been to maintain the energy produced during such moments of crisis:

We lived through some very hard times... remembering what happened on May 16 in Barranca is terrible, it was so hard, so hard, a crime against humanity, which targeted the most vulnerable. But we knew what to do. There was a *paro cívico*, a *paro cívico* with a lot of symbolism. I remember those empty boxes were something that had a big impact, that was an idea that came out of a meeting attended by 50 people, where we cried, but we also asked what could be done, how should we denounce the crime, so that it would not just be speeches, not just words, so that it would be a symbol that could impact and reflect what this meant to Barranca, and I think we achieved that.⁸⁷⁷

Each day for the five days that the *paro cívico* lasted, the Bishop of Barranca presided over a Mass of mourning in front of the union headquarters, with the empty coffins on display in front of him. At the time of the massacre the OFP's youth movement, or *movimiento juvenil*, based in the poor *barrios* of the city, was one of the most dynamic initiatives within the city's wider popular movement. Attacking young people at a party in the heart of the neighbourhood greatly diminished the *capacidad de convocatoria* of the OFP, and led to the undoing of the *movimiento juvenil*.

⁸⁷⁷ Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 10, 2006).

The OFP itself has never been in danger of disappearing. Yolanda Becerra, president of the OFP, explains that the country's largest and oldest grassroots women's organization survives because of its size and scope:

I think that the paramilitary offensive really began in 1999, and in 2000 to 2001 it got much worse. We have had very difficult times... Because there are so many women in the OFP and we are so spread out, that has meant that when the women are threatened in Puerto Wilches, then the women in Barranca can rest a bit easier, when we are threatened in the *nororiente*, the *suroriente* is calmer, and when they are threatened in the *suroriente*, the *nororiente* is calmer. This has allowed us to manage the situation. ...at times the young people are threatened, and then we veterans are able to be more secure, and when it is not the young people who are threatened, it is us...⁸⁷⁸

It is, Becerra says, practically impossible for the paramilitaries to take on the whole of the OFP as an organization. The programs of the OFP have actually been expanded in recent years, and the organization has diversified its activities, engaged in more and more community housing and development work, and received recognition and support from international organizations.

The successes of the OFP are, however, far from unequivocal. Yolanda Becerra has observed a process of internal bureaucratization and professionalization in local organizations that parallels similar developments across the country. As Winifred Tate writes: "Throughout the 1990s human rights work became increasingly professionalized, and new institutional norms and practices developed. Solidarity groups staffed by volunteers were replaced by nongovernmental organizations staffed by well-trained, full-time paid professionals, often lawyers."⁸⁷⁹ According to Becerra, the attendant disaffection of grassroots members has been especially problematic for groups in Barranca, where there is a long tradition of mass participation in social movement-led

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁹ Tate, *Counting the Dead*, 107.

projects and activities. While there are fewer lawyers and full-time professional activists in Barranca than in major cities such as Bogotá or Medellín, Becerra argues that Barranca-based groups are dependent on financial assistance from international agencies. Ironically, groups such as the OFP must justify the foreign assistance they receive on the basis that they can ensure high levels of popular participation in meetings and workshops. As Becerra observes:

I think that international assistance caused the institutionalization of popular work. This assistance was institutionalized so much that many professionals in Colombia were able to find work... one has to recall that in the popular movements there were always professionals who had their own jobs, and dedicated some of their free time, part of their life, to social movements. It was more a question of political commitment, but later on there was a lot of unemployment, an economic crisis, and these professionals no longer had work, so they turned to social movements... While this process of institutionalization proceeded we lost a political dimension to the social movements. Many more NGOs were created than social movements, and the people were left to fend for themselves. So, now NGOs convene the people to participate in timely things. And so the people say, "well, we have conditions, I will go to the workshop, but you have to provide transportation to the meeting, I'll go, but..." Do you know what I mean? It was not always like this. It used to be, "I **want** to go to the workshop, I **have** to go to the workshop, I **need** to go." We have lost our strength, and we left the people behind.⁸⁸⁰

Becerra says that her own process of disillusionment began with the murder of Lara Parada, the near-decimation of CREDHOS, the retreat of ANUC from the region, and many other catastrophes. The subsequent conversion of the Barranca-based groups' *capacidad de convocatoria* into an asset to secure funding was not anticipated.

Other factors that weakened local social movements were exogenous to Barranca, such as the fall of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in 1989, which to Latin American progressives was a historic defeat comparable to the Chilean military coup of 1973. The failure of peace talks between the FARC guerrillas and the government of

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid.

President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) was also a blow to local efforts for peace and human rights. Still, through to the end of the 1990s Barranca's social movements battled through adversity, perhaps naively so. Yolanda Becerra reflects on the cumulative effect of many years of struggle, and the losses suffered during that time:

As the years pass, you feel as if the utopia is moving further away, but that it is not impossible, so you continue doing the same things, in the same dynamic. Because we started to speak about... an evaluation of some of the mistakes, certain things... Nicaragua was a key moment, when we started to rethink things... like power, what are we going to do with it? We started to think about many things, and one day we had to start all over again because we were no longer capable of continuing on as before. This is not to say we would stop working, but you have to begin, to begin again.⁸⁸¹

The decline of the revolutionary option in Barrancabermeja occurred later than in Nicaragua and most other places in Latin America. Many social activists now question whether the guerrillas played a negative role in the city, particularly in terms of apparent attempts to co-opt civilian protest spaces like the *paro cívico*.

This Chance to Continue Dreaming

The future of Barranca's movement for human rights is not clear. What is obvious is that, to make sense of human rights movements in areas of conflict like the oil refinery town of Barrancabermeja and the region of Magdalena Medio, an historically grounded understanding of the relation between human rights and social change is necessary. On the one hand, we can look at the impact that human rights movements have on social and political change. On the other, we can look at the impact that major shifts in social or political contexts have on human rights movements. This is because, at least in this place, the human rights movement is intimately connected to the social and

⁸⁸¹ Ibid.

union movements; it grew out of them in response to the counterinsurgency violence of the Colombian military and its paramilitary allies that targeted guerrillas and social movement activists alike.

In this economically and strategically important oil centre, the guerrillas also sought to build bases of political and social influence. Legal activists from officially recognized movements that shared the guerrillas' revolutionary politics, such as the Communist Party (PCC), the Patriotic Union (UP), and ¡A Luchar!, were among the first to be attacked by paramilitaries. But the hardest blows were dealt to ordinary citizens, most of whom had no political affiliation, who participated in popular forms of protest, including *paros cívicos* and *marchas campesinas*. The guerrillas and the military occupied and divided the Magdalena Medio region, and then the city of Barrancabermeja. Neither side had total hegemonic control over the territories to which they laid claim, but their presence ultimately diminished civilian space for organizing. Human rights activists themselves have been savagely attacked, yet have survived more than 20 years now.

Former CREDHOS president Régulo Madero maintains that human rights activism in Barranca has been successful because it has contributed to the sustaining of alternative visions "...this utopia, this chance to continue dreaming".⁸⁸² It is of course impossible to know how many lives have been saved. Defending human rights in a conflict area requires total immersion in the social and political environment. In terms of effectiveness under such difficult conditions of ongoing conflict, many of the people interviewed for this dissertation insist that the movement for human rights as such can only be relevant and effective if the local social movements that have rallied around the

⁸⁸² Interview with author (Barrancabermeja, March 8, 2006).

cause of human rights since the late 1980s are able to recover. From inside conflict-affected communities it is of course a challenge to see everything in perspective. But such a deep level of engagement is absolutely necessary in order to respond to daily events and also major shifts in the political landscape. None of the people I spoke with said that they judged the effectiveness of human rights activism solely in terms of the reduction of violence. Time and again, the impact of CREDHOS and human rights activists in the Magdalena Medio is measured in terms of the continued existence of popular social movements and the persistence of the spirit of rebelliousness and irreverence that has made Barranca famous.

Appendix: Chronology of Violence and Popular Protest in Barrancabermeja

- 1905 – Roberto De Mares gains rights to Barranca oil concession
- 1916 – Drilling begins by Tropical Oil Company
- 1919 – Tropical Oil Company and oil rights sold to Standard Oil of New Jersey
- 1921 – Refinery built at Barranca
- 1922 – Incorporation of Municipality of Barrancabermeja
- 1924 – First major oil strike
 - Strike leaders arrested and prosecuted by military tribunal
- 1926 – Barranca-Cartagena pipeline completed
- 1927 – Second major oil strike
- 1929 – “Bolchevique” uprising in Santander and Tolima
- 1935 – Third major oil strike
- 1938 – Fourth major oil strike
- 1948 – Fifth Major Oil Strike
 - Uprising following murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: *La comuna de Barranca*
- 1950 – Strike for nationalization of Colombian oil production
- 1951 – Drilling operations nationalized
- 1958 – Declaration of Sitges: end of *La Violencia* and start of National Front
- 1960 – *Unión Sindical Obrera* “solidarity strike” with oil workers in other regions
- 1961 – Barranca refinery nationalized
- 1963 – Oil workers strike (first major strike in 15 years)
 - First *paro cívico* for social rights and local development
- 1964 – *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* first military action in Magdalena Medio
- 1968 – The FARC opens a front in the southern Magdalena Medio
- 1970 – Conservative candidate Misael Pastrana elected President
- 1971 – Oil workers strike and occupation of refinery
 - Court martial for strike leaders
- 1972 – *Organización Femenina Popular* established
- 1973 – Army carries out *Operación Anorí* against the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*
- 1975 – *Paro cívico* for public services and land for peasants
 - Establishment of *Barrio Primero de Mayo* through land invasion
- 1976 – Magdalena Medio declared a “war zone” by national government
- 1977 – Series of wildcat strikes by oil workers
 - Oil workers strike lasting 43 days
 - Military mayor named to Barranca, Lieutenant Álvaro Bonilla López
 - National *paro cívico*
- 1980 – First evidence of human rights abuses by paramilitary groups
- 1981 – Formation of *Muerte a Secuestradores* “MAS” in southern Magdalena Medio
- 1983 – *Paro cívico por el agua* (civil strike for potable water)
 - Creation of *Coordinadora Popular* civil society coalition
- 1985 – Assassination of ELN co-founder and social activist Ricardo Lara Parada
- 1986 – Assassination of Patriotic Union party congressman Leonardo Posada
- 1987 – Grenade attack on 3 member of Patriotic Union party
 - Paro cívico* to protest attacks Patriotic Union party
 - Murder of 14-year of Sandra Rondón Pinto

- First major human rights protest (*Paro Cívico por la Vida*)
Paro del noroiente regional peasant protests
 Creation of Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS)
Organización Femenina Popular becomes independent from Catholic Church
- 1988 – *Paro cívico* to protest murder of labour leader Manuel Gustavo Chacón
 Peasant march and protest marking first anniversary of *paro del nororiente*
 Massacre of peasants by Colombian army at La Llana Caliente
Paro cívico to protest murder of labour leader Hamet Consuegra
 I General Assembly of CREDHOS
- 1989 – First Regional Human Rights Forum hosted by CREDHOS
 La Rochela massacre of 12 Colombian government judicial officials by
 military/paramilitary forces
- 1990 – Creation of Human Rights Committee of Sabana de Torres, Santander
 II General Assembly of CREDHOS
- 1991 – Creation of the Colombian Naval Intelligence Network
- 1992 – III General Assembly of CREDHOS
 Six members of CREDHOS exiled
- 1998 – May 16 Massacre in *suroriente* (7 killed, 25 disappeared)
- 2001 – Paramilitary takeover of Barrancabermeja
- 2002 – Election of Álvaro Uribe Vélez as President of Colombia
- 2003 – *Coordinadora Popular* civil society coalition is dissolved
 Creation of NGO *Corporación Región* by former CREDHOS directors
 Establishment of the *Espacio de trabajadoras y tradajadores de derechos humanos del Magdalena Medio*

Afterword

Networks that exist for the protection of human rights in conflict areas differ from other civil society networks because their members are frequently required to respond to emergencies. When the phone rings, you may answer to find a colleague in grave physical or emotional distress on the other end of the line. It is not unusual for crises to occur on the weekend, in the early morning or late evening. You will be expected to quickly and confidently zero in on key pieces of information. In the everyday practice of human rights protection, trust, discretion and knowledge are indivisible.

This dissertation is about the people who defend human rights in the midst of armed conflict. I lived in the oil refining centre of Barrancabermeja from January through December 1998. At the time I was working as a volunteer with Peace Brigades International (PBI), an international human rights group which provides unarmed protective accompaniment to threatened social activists. Our work mainly consisted of accompanying local human rights activists in their daily rounds. We also undertook research trips to small towns along the Magdalena River, Colombia's most important natural transportation system. Everywhere we visited there were priests, trade unionists, peasant organizers, attorneys, municipal councillors and high school teachers who denounced the violence perpetrated in the region. These people were the grassroots members of a large network of human rights activism centred in Barrancabermeja.

During my time in Colombia I also met dozens of times with national police, army and navy officials posted throughout the region known as the Magdalena Medio. Some of these encounters took place in bunkers pockmarked by machine gun fire from Marxist guerrillas operating in the area, where young conscripts would tell us that they

had to travel in groups, fully-armed, to make the 5 minute trip across town to call their girlfriends from the local Telecom office. A couple of times, we passed through roadblocks set-up by right-wing paramilitary groups located just a few minutes from military bases. I also met with General Fernando Millán, the once-indicted paramilitary organizer who was commander of the Fifth Brigade of the Colombia army based in the city of Bucaramanga. As he spoke angrily about human rights activists from Barranca, denouncing individuals by name as bandits and subversives, I took note of the photo of himself with Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on the wall behind his desk. It was at times like these that the dangers to which people in Barranca and the surrounding region were exposed came into clear focus.

On the evening of May 16, 1998 a large group of armed men killed seven people, and abducted another 25 in Barrancabermeja. Miguel, a PBI volunteer from Pamplona, Spain, called to tell us the news. At the time he was accompanying Osiris Bayter, then president of the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights (CREDHOS). The details were not yet clear and nobody knew exactly how many people had been killed. Our fears and disbelief were fed by rumours and misinformation. How had they died? Where were the missing people being held? Over the next five days Barranca was gripped by the largest popular protests in a generation. We spent the next five days and nights accompanying members of the Popular Women's Organization (OFP) and the Regional Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CREDHOS) as they stood vigil by the barricades set up at strategic points around town. We frantically wrote reports about everything that was happening and sent them to human rights groups around the

world, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Washington Office on Latin America and the Inter-Church Committee for Human Rights in Latin America.

Between 1999 and 2002 I continued to work for PBI at the international level, travelling to Washington, D.C. and Ottawa to lobby lawmakers and rally civil society groups to help protect human rights workers in Colombia. During that period I was able to return to Barranca a number of times, and discuss current events with local activists as they unfolded. Along the way I heard stories about the protests, strikes and organizing campaigns of the 1970s and early 1980s. Long before Barranca became known as one of the most violent cities in one of the most violent countries in the world, it was a model of social movement organizing. These experiences were the inspiration for my research.

References

Oral Interviews

Angel Tolosa Pontón – 27/09/05 – Currently employed by national NGO Planeta Paz, former President of the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (ANUC) – Sector Independiente, long-time resident of Barranca

David Ravelo – 10/03/06 – Current president of CREDHOS, former Barranca municipal councilor on behalf of the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC), long-time resident of Barranca

Francisco Campos – 20/09/05 – Member of CREDHOS 1990-2005, Secretary General of CREDHOS (1998-2005), former municipal councilor in the nearby town of Sabana de Torres, Santander, long-time resident of Barranca

Irene Villamizar – 08/03/06 – Elementary schoolteacher and administrator, founding member of CREDHOS, member of CREDHOS board of directors (1987-1992), community-based organizer for the Pastoral Social, long-time resident of Barranca

Jael Quiroga – 27/09/05 – President of national NGO Reiniciar, founding member of CREDHOS, CREDHOS board of directors (1987-1993), former Barranca city councilor for Conservative Party, long-time resident of Barranca

Jorge Gómez Lizarazo – 08/03/06 – Former Defensor del Pueblo for the Magdalena Medio region, founding member of CREDHOS, President of CREDHOS (1987-1993), human rights lawyer, long-time resident of Barranca

Luisa Serrano – 14/03/06 – Member of CREDHOS board of directors (1988-1993), secondary school teacher, teachers' union activist, volunteer organizer with Albergue Campesino de Barrancabermeja (1988-1995), long-time resident of Barranca

Rafael Gómez – 27/09/05 – Currently employed by national NGO Reiniciar, founding member of CREHDOS, member CREDHOS board of directors (1988-1993), former president of refinery local, Unión Sindical Obrera (USO) oil workers union, long-time resident of Barranca

Régulo Madero – 08/09/06 – Currently member of Barranca NGO Corporación Nación, Former CREDHOS president (1998-2005), former departmental deputy for Antioquia for Patriotic Union (UP), long-time resident of Magdalena Medio region

Yolanda Becerra – 10/03/06 – Longstanding President of the Organización Femenina Popular (OFP), active with the OFP since 1989, long-time resident of Barranca

Amanda Romero – 19/10/06 – Human Rights activist, who served as advisor to Barranca-based organizations since between 1977 and 1999, while working with Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos (CSPP), Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP) and Instituto de Servicios Legales Alternativos (ILSA)

Padre Jaime Barba Rincón – 25/10/06 – Catholic Priest, rector of Barranca's Cathedral, former Mayor of Barranca (1983-1985), public official, long-time resident of Barranca

Juan de Dios Castilla Amell – 26/10/06 – Currently employee of the Diocese of Barranca, former lay missionary worker with Pastoral Social in poor barrios of Barranca, former public functionary and university instructor, long-time resident of Barranca

Fernando Acuña – 27/10/06 – Former President of Federación de Trabajadores Petroleros (FEDEPETROL), former member of CREDHOS, historian, oil worker dismissed following 1977 strike, long-time resident of Barranca

Ramón Rangel – 18/12/07 – Director of the Human Rights Commission of the Unión Sindical Obrera oil workers unión since it was established in 1988, member of CREDHOS' board of directors (1990-1999), long-time resident of Barranca

Luis Pinilla Pinilla – 22/12/07 – Currently political science professor at university in Bogotá, formerly mayor of Barranca (1970-1971), who left the city in the 1970s. Born in Barranca, son of Conservative politician from Barranca who was killed during the 1948 uprising in the city known as the *Comuna de Barranca*

Jorge Nuñez – 21/12/07 – Historian, editor of several locally-published books, including *Crónicas de luchas por el poder local* (1997), former municipal official, long-time resident of Barranca

Anonymous Interviews

Eight anonymous interview transcripts with Barranca social movement leaders conducted in 2004 were provided by the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP).

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