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An Epic Journey towards a Refugee Visa

Alberto Grajales García

Peace in Colombia was shattered on April 9, 1948. The shots that ended the life of Jorge Eliécer Gaitan, a liberal reformer and the strongest candidate for the 1950 presidential elections, initiated a wave of violence that swept across the capital, Bogotá, that day and set the destiny of Colombia for the next decades, beginning a civil war that has yet to end. During 62 years of conflict, the same actors have simply changed name and uniform. Disgracefully, all sides have committed murder against unarmed civilians - even the military have been transformed into executioners of civilians, sometimes purposefully, other times mistakenly.

Historical context

In the 1950's, the Liberal and Conservative parties battled with a savagery that left thousands of people dead. The survivors of these massacres became the founders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), a communist guerrilla movement who continue to battle the Colombian government up to the present day.

In the 1980s a new actor entered the war, the United Self Defence Forces (AUC), known as the paramilitaries, an extreme right-wing militia born as an armed response to the communist guerrilla movement. The AUC has received support from drug-traffickers and sectors of the government, including the military, congressmen, mayors and governors.

The year 2000 initiated a period of negotiations with the FARC under Plan Colombia, a bilateral agreement between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Colombian President Andres Pastrana. Yet the negotiations with the FARC failed and with the arrival of Alvaro Uribe as President of Colombia, Plan Colombia changed course. An armed solution resulting in the military defeat of the guerrilla groups was now viewed as the path to stability. To achieve this goal, the economic, technological, military and intelligence aid provided by the U.S. has been fundamental. Social projects were abandoned, and the war intensified. Currently President Juan Manuel Santos is continuing on the same track as his predecessor, Uribe - seeing the total annihilation of subversive groups as the only solution.

In this story there are no heroes - all actors bear responsibility for the tragedy that the Colombian people live. The civilian population is the principal victim of this civil war. We have been massacred, displaced and stripped of our possessions. Our children have been forcefully recruited for the war. At least 3,000,000 people have been forced from their homes. Most move to the big Colombian cities, with little support to find housing, work or food, and with almost no protection for their lives. Those who are able to escape alive seek refuge in neighbouring countries. In the case

of Ecuador, it is estimated that 250,000 people¹ live with a need for international protection. Of those, only about 52,000 have received refugee status.

My journey towards a refugee visa

To respond to this humanitarian crisis, the government of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa created the Enhanced Registry (*Registro Ampliado*) to provide refugee visas to Colombians without documentation, but in need of international protection. Many have not asked for refugee protection because they do not know how to, because they live in cities in the Western or Southern regions far from the capital, because their petitions had been denied in the past, because they fear that the groups who displaced them will find them in Ecuador, or because they fear deportation. Therefore, the Enhanced Registry plan was implemented in 2009 in various cities on the Colombian-Ecuador border by the General Refugee Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with Alfonso Morales as its Director.

In my case, before travelling to the provincial city of Esmeraldas to sign up to the Enhanced Registry program, I attended a workshop about the Registry in the offices of Asylum Access, an NGO in Quito, Ecuador. This organisation plays an important role in guiding Colombian asylum seekers through the refugee process. That day, in May 2009, a group of us listened as an Asylum Access volunteer gave us all of the information necessary to understand how the Enhanced Registry would function and when and where it would take place.

I arrived in Esmeraldas around midnight on a Sunday. At the bus terminal I felt disoriented, with good reason as this was my first time in the city. I asked a man selling coconut candy for the address of the stadium where the Registry would be taking place. What great luck I had - the man, in a very hospitable manner, took me to the exact location where the Registry was being held!

I was surprised by the large number of people who had already been camping out there for several days. People were waiting in store-bought tents, improvised shacks of wood with plastic roofs, mattresses thrown on the floor.... It was literally a refugee camp.

A cloud of smoke suddenly enveloped me, filling my nostrils with the unmistakable smell of charcoal grilled meat. A friend invited me to share a delicious barbecue of chicken, beef and sausage - indisputable proof of Colombian solidarity no matter what the circumstances. While I ate, a volunteer from the refugee association ARCOE approached us. My friend introduced us and the volunteer put our number on a list of refugees to be attended the following Monday.

The camp had a surreal feeling: people who had been persecuted, exiled, threatened, battered in their bodies and in their souls found themselves there joking, laughing,

¹ The exact number of Colombian refugees and persons in need of international protection in Ecuador is unknown, because of the so-called "invisible" population that has not been registered. Official sources cite between 135,000 and 250,000. See, e.g. <http://www.acnur.org/pais/index.php?accion=pag&id=1434&iso2=CO>, <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/2009/bol281.asp>.

celebrating, sharing, making friends, singing and playing music. A group of people sang “*Noches de Bocagrande*”, plucking the melancholy notes on a guitar. For a few seconds, I remembered Cartagena de Indias in my beloved Colombia.

I began to walk among the masses, observing, getting to know people, listening. Some people were complaining about being uncomfortable, others about the bribes they had to pay to corrupt police, who, knowing that they did not have visas, demanded \$20 a week to allow them to work. Some complained of police extorting sexual favours from the women, under the threat of deportation. Others complained about mistreatment by xenophobic Ecuadorians, who deny Colombians the opportunity to work, to cash a cheque, to open a bank account, to enrol their children in school, or to rent them somewhere to live. These problems of discrimination occur in many Ecuadorian cities where Colombians live.

Hot coffee cooked over a wood fire woke me up, so I could get into line and wait my turn: number 905. The officials of the Ministry and UNHCR arrived around 8 a.m. At this point the volunteers from the refugee association, ARCOE, some with megaphones in hand, helped organise the lines: Women with children and pregnant women in one line, the disabled and the elderly in another - in that manner we organised ourselves. The cemented area quickly filled with people from all ethnicities and regions: Afro-Colombians from the Pacific and the Caribbean, *mestizos* from Putumayo, Caquetá, Huila and Nariño, mixed people from the areas of Cesar, Bolívar, Sucre and Córdoba, cowboys from Meta, Arauca and Casanare, *rolos* from Bogotá, *paisas* from Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda and Quindío, *pingos* from Southern Santander and *toches* from Northern Santander. The Colombian people were well represented.

An intense sun beat down without mercy against the skin of everyone present. Mothers improvised rectangular patches of shade with pieces of cardboard to protect their babies. At around 9 a.m. officials from UNHCR and the General Refugee Directorate began to attend the public. When my turn came, they put a yellow bracelet with a printed number on my left wrist, and told me not to remove this bracelet even to take a bath. I felt like a specimen in a National Geographic documentary. They also gave me a small square ticket with a stamp containing a number and date for my interview: May 30th.

I made the second trip from Quito in the company of my daughter and my grandson. We arrived at the stadium at 7 a.m., a few hours before my interview, ate breakfast, and waited to be attended. The process was well planned. During each step, officials from the Ministry helped and guided us in a clear, friendly manner. Our respective interviews were conducted by patient, compassionate people. Families left with refugee visas in their hands and a smile on their faces, incontrovertible proof of the happiness and gratefulness towards all of the people who made the Enhanced Registry possible. We were no different. When we got our visas we couldn't help but say:

“Now to celebrate...”

“Celebrate?” asked the astonished official who helped us.

“Of course, with a delicious seafood lunch,” I responded.

Future Challenges

There were certainly mistakes and challenges with the Enhanced Registry, as one might expect from the implementation of such an ambitious plan for the first time. Many of the people in the provisional camps face discrimination and the lack of proper shelter renders them vulnerable to exploitation. If another Registry plan were to be implemented, it would be recommendable for it to travel to other Ecuadorian cities to avoid forcing asylum seekers to travel 10-15 hours to border cities to obtain their refugee status. The Registry has, however, been successful in giving twenty-eight thousand Colombian asylum seekers refugee status during the year-long plan, allowing for people to move on and celebrate their entry into a new life.

Alberto Grajales García, writer, poet, novelist and storyteller, was born in Neira, Caldas Colombia. He currently resides in Quito, Ecuador, where he writes opinion pieces for the magazine Contigo Ecuador and publishes his books online.

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