

would be no undoing of what had already been done. Good or bad, the world was already on the Huaorani's doorstep. And soon it would be kicking down the door. Tourists and television are already pushing at the hinges. Now contracts are being signed to develop a massive oil field on the edge of Guinto and Caminga's territory.

The Huaorani have no sense of apocalypse, it has been said. That is fortunate. If they had, their spears would be out once more and the Coronoco red with blood.

In neighbouring Colombia, things are different. The End Times have already arrived. The bloodletting has begun.

INTO THE HANDS OF TYRANTS

Colombia and violence

Let the monsters who have infested Colombian soil, covering it with blood, vanish forever.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, DECREE OF WAR TO THE DEATH, 1813

Bogotá

As my plane taxied to a stop in Bogotá's international airport, Guillermo Pascuas received a .45-calibre bullet in the middle of his forehead. He died instantly, his body crumpling to the muddy floor of his uncle's farmyard.

The murder went unmentioned by the newspapers. No police report was filed. No coroner was alerted. It would be weeks before even his mother found out.

I only hear about the killing because I happen to bump into his uncle. Three days after the event, Álvaro is sitting on the steps of a Mennonite church in downtown Bogotá. He's staring listlessly at the belching traffic as it inches down the congested Avenue 19. His shoulders are hunched and his gaze blank. Álvaro is a man in shock.

The unschooled farmer is dressed in the same work clothes that he wore on the morning of the murder: a pair of mud-stained jeans, a black T-shirt imprinted with the insignia of a heavy-metal band and a scuffed pair of trainers with a hole in one of the toes. A charitable stranger had since donated a winter coat to his meagre wardrobe. The garment is too big, and its long sleeves droop down over his hands. He keeps trying to roll them up, but they insist on falling down again. The oversized jacket has the effect of shrinking Álvaro's slim frame even further.

On the step beside him lies a small bag of lemons, a gift from the

same unknown Samaritan. The fruit is overripe, and Álvaro's initial attempts at street hawking have so far met with failure. He has no money, no friends, no identity papers and is fast running low on hope.

I sit down on the step next to him and pull out my tourist map from my backpack. The Colombian capital is new to me, as it is to Álvaro.

I'd spent my first day in Colombia walking the cramped, colonial streets of La Candelaria, Bogotá's delightfully dishevelled old town. I'd breakfasted on corn-dough *arepas*, paid a visit to the military museum and hunted down the cloistered hacienda where Simón Bolívar once lived.

The following day, I'd ventured by tram to the city's new districts in the plusher northern suburbs. Compared to the old quarter, the hustle and bustle had surprised me. Everything was movement and glinting glass. Suited executives were running in and out of metallic skyscrapers. Office workers were gulping down morning shots of strong black coffee. Businessmen were gabbling into mobiles. Colombia felt and looked like a country on the up.

My initial interviews confirmed this rosy picture. Stellar growth figures, a booming stock market, foreign companies clambering to invest. Apparently, it all had to do with something mysterious called *confianza*, 'confidence'. According to the cover story in that week's *Business Week* magazine, Colombians were high on the snuff. With crime statistics at their lowest for years, Colombia Inc. was back in business. Let the good times roll.

Álvaro could be excused for seeing things differently.

'*Tiene la hora?*' he asks in a timid voice, tapping his finger on his thin, bare wrist.

'*La una y media.*'

He asks if I'm from round here. Everything about me – my dress, my accent, my map – must indicate I'm not. I suppose he is looking to start up a conversation.

'No, actually, I'm from Britain,' I reply.

The out-of-towner looks briefly nonplussed, realises it must be a

long way from Bogotá and concludes we have an important factor in common.

'I'm also from far away. The province of Meta to be exact, further south from here,' he says. 'My name's Álvaro, by the way.'

'Oliver,' I reply in kind.

My new acquaintance then tells me that he knows no one in the city. By the look of his ruffled hair and unkempt appearance, I guess he could be sleeping rough.

'What made you leave home, if you don't mind me asking?'

He doesn't answer immediately, just looks at me with vacant, bewildered eyes and then turns away, sniffing quietly.

'It's a long story,' he replies eventually, more to the church's granite step than to me.

I'm conscious that my city map and foreign face make me a prime target for confidence tricksters. But Álvaro doesn't come across as a conman. His distress seems genuine. I take a punt on his story being so too:

'Perhaps you'd like to tell me over some food?' I suggest, pointing to a lunch bar across the street.

One bowl of lumpy potato soup and two heaped portions of beef stew later, Álvaro is ready to talk. Placing his knife and fork side by side on the empty plate, he explains how he and his sister's son had grown close over the years. Álvaro's wife had upped and left four years ago, taking his two children with her. In spite of being fifteen years younger than him, Guillermo became more like a brother than a nephew.

He shifts forwards to the more immediate past and the morning of the murder: 'I was sitting with my nephew on the low stone wall at the front of the farmstead.'

The two men had both risen early, as they always did. It was a Wednesday, and the week's list of jobs still stretched out before them. The priority for the day was to buy some medicine for an ailing heifer. That required a trip to La Macarena, the local town, a twenty-minute car journey away. But Álvaro had no car – never had done. On foot, the journey was closer to two hours. Neither man

fancied the trek. They had just resolved to flip for it when four armed men appeared around the corner of the wall. The toss was never called.

'Guillermo was sitting with his back to them. It was me that spotted them,' Álvaro says, his mind's eye seemingly flitting back to that fateful morning three days ago.

Although he'd never seen any of the men before, the farmer identified them immediately. In their frayed green fatigues and rubber boots, the gun-toting foursome bore the unmistakable appearance of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or the FARC as they're more commonly known.

Established in the mid-1960s, when the Cold War was just getting hot, the FARC had taken to the hills to strike a blow for socialism. Other left-wing guerrilla groups had joined the call. Somewhere along the line their ideology gave way to banditry.

'I guess the fear at seeing them must have shown on my face because Guillermo swivelled round immediately.' Álvaro reaches for his Coca-Cola.

It wasn't the first time the FARC had come to the farm. They were regular visitors. Álvaro's land lay in the middle of one of Colombia's guerrilla-controlled 'red zones'. Each month, someone would come calling for his *vacuna* – literally, his 'vaccine'. This regular protection fee is calculated according to head of cattle. With thirty cows in his herd, Álvaro's monthly antidote came in at 150,000 pesos. An additional sales tax of 30,000 pesos was tacked on for every cow that he sold.

'The FARC say the money goes towards their ongoing struggle for the *pueblo*,' he explains, virtually spitting out the Spanish word for 'the people'.

Fail to pay, and the *pueblo's* alleged defenders turn very nasty, very quickly. Álvaro recalls an occasion when a buyer had landed him with a bad debt for two prize heifers. Bean-counting FARC style doesn't allow for such discrepancies. The soldiers stripped him naked and tied him to a *viga linda* tree. Then a member of the accountancy unit dealt a few sharp, well-aimed blows at the bark with a machete.

Out of the tree and onto Álvaro's naked body scuttled a small army of electric ants. The FARC heavies kept him there for five minutes. He had heard of men being tied up for nearly an hour. Even so, it would be a fortnight before the painful welts began to subside.

In the case of the FARC, their frequent visits did not breed familiarity. They only served to augment fear. And on this occasion, Álvaro had good reason to be afraid.

'It all started at the beginning of the year when a foreign photographer appeared at the door of my farmhouse,' he says, his storytelling inching forwards and backwards as he struggles to fit all the pieces together.

From Álvaro's description, his forty-hectare plot in the midst of Colombia's central *cordillera* sounds truly idyllic: fields of ripe plantain and banana trees stretching out like rows of feather dusters, miles of thick forest cover tracing the rolling-pin curves of the hills, a stream coursing down the mountainside, fat with the winter rains.

'I told him to go ahead. I guessed it was for a calendar or something. To tell you the truth, I quite like the idea of some *gringo* admiring the view that I wake up to every morning.' He checks himself. 'Used to wake up to.'

Álvaro forward winds two months, to a second unannounced visit. This time his guests came with AK-47s rather than Nikon digitals. The Colombian army had decided Álvaro's farm would make a strategic spot from which to attack the FARC. There was no 'please' or 'thank you' on this occasion. It was Álvaro's patriotic duty to do as he was told. The army were fighting for the *pueblo* after all.

'Another Coke?' I ask as Álvaro taps the empty base of his glass with a plastic straw.

'Sure, thanks.'

He watches the waiter pour a refill and waits for the bubbles to settle before taking a slurp. His thirst temporarily quenched, he picks up his thread.

The army platoon ended up staying three weeks. Uncle and nephew remained holed up inside the farmhouse throughout. The

pair spent their days listening to the rattle of machine-gun fire in the nearby hills and the sound of heavy artillery rockets overhead.

The government conscripts suffered eight fatalities in total. Their corpses were piled unceremoniously in body bags on Alvaro's back porch. Four times as many guerrilla members died, or so the army claimed.

Thinking back to those days cooped up, a prisoner in his own home, he claims the fighting itself didn't scare him. Death or survival lay out of his hands, he resolved. What kept him awake at night were the repercussions. Having government forces camped on his lawn, whether willingly or not, singled him out as a collaborator. And, as every Colombian knows, collaborators come to an ugly end.

To Alvaro's surprise, the expected reprisal didn't materialise when the army unit decamped. For four weeks they waited, and nothing. But just as he and Guillermo thought life was returning to normal, the government soldiers returned.

'When was that? I ask, trying to bring some sort of chronology to the pattern of events Alvaro is describing.

'Let me think. What are we today? Sunday, no? It would have been two weeks ago to the day then.'

These were no garden-variety recruits. Army headquarters had ordered in Colombia's crack mountain battalion for the second assault. Trained and equipped with the help of USA Special Forces, they're specialised in locating and eliminating guerrilla insurgents. Their offensive lasted six days. No body bags appeared on the back porch this time round.

The four FARC soldiers comprised the long-awaited payback committee. The leader was in his mid-twenties and prematurely balding. According to Alvaro, he was the only one who spoke. The remainder stood guard, each brandishing a large machine gun. None of the lackeys were out of their teens.

There were no introductions; the FARC spokesman only dealt in questions and curses. 'He wanted to know why they had not been informed about the photographer,' Alvaro recalls.

Tears began welling up in the corners of his eyes as he plays back

the incident. 'They cared more about the *gringo* than the army. The soldiers they could kill, but the *gringo* they could kidnap. They wanted to know why I hadn't reported his visit.'

Three days, and it's the first time he's recounted aloud the events that have been constantly swimming around in his head.

The bald-headed leader said that they had already overlooked his 'discrepancies'. First, the photographer. Then, the army. Their patience would only stretch so far, he'd said. By entertaining the enemy a second time, Alvaro had overstepped the mark.

'He demanded I leave the farm right then and there. I said I would but asked if he could give me some time - just a few hours - to sell some things. I hadn't a single *peso*, you see.'

The previous days of pent-up emotion suddenly overwhelm him. Asphyxiating, discordant sobs rack his shaking body. He lifts his trembling hands to his face, tears rolling down his cheeks, wetting his fingers.

'He swore at me again.' The sentence is barely audible, engulfed by despairing, grief-stricken sobs.

"You--"

He chokes on the phrase as if it were a physical entity, an obstruction trapping his windpipe, making him gag and splutter for air.

The restaurant's customers are down to just us and a slovenly dressed office worker across the room. Alvaro's outburst causes him to break from his newspaper crossword. He stares over at us, his expression a mix of curiosity and annoyance at having his concentration disturbed.

"You obviously don't understand the word 'now'," the leader screamed back.'

My dining companion remains oblivious to the office worker's stare, shouting the word 'now' in imitation.

With that, the FARC commander pulled a pistol from his holster, turned to Guillermo and shot him at point blank range in the head.

'It was so quick and casual...?' Abruptly, his crying stops, his tears ducts momentarily checked by the atrocious vividness of the scene in rewind. 'Like putting down a dog.'

He falls silent. I order us both a coffee. Neither of us speaks for the five minutes it takes for the order to arrive. When he returns to his story, his voice is muffled and his eyes dazed and blurred. The trauma of the past few days seems to have caught up with him.

'The man then raised his gun at me. "Now do you understand 'now'? Get out of here or the next bullet's for you."

Álvaro turned and fled, dashing through the gate, leaping over the stream and tearing down the hillside as fast as his legs would carry him. He hit the main road in little over half an hour. Wheezing madly and still blind with fear, he flagged down the first bus that passed. He jumped on without inquiring where it was heading. Noting his distraught state, the driver waived the fare and dropped the empty-handed farmer at the end of his route three hours to the north.

Álvaro isn't sure what the town was called. He just remembers sitting for hours in a busy bus terminal, his mind dulled by grief and panic, his ability to rationalise temporarily immobilised. After what felt like hours, a kindly woman approached him. He was huddled on a bench, shivering in his T-shirt, more from shock than cold. They spoke briefly, he forgets what about exactly. But it transpired that the lady had a truck. She was travelling to Bogotá that night and offered him a lift.

Álvaro took the ride. And so it was that he went from sitting outside his farm one sunny morning to standing at a busy intersection in Bogotá the next.

Two days later, and Álvaro was still at a total loss as to what to do. The man who gave him the lemons had suggested he go to the Abasto fruit market and buy some papaya. He could then sell it in the street and make some money that way.

'But how can I buy papaya when I don't even have a *peso*?

Above all, Álvaro wants a paid job, any job. With a small wage, he hopes he can restart his life. He could save some money and eventually move back to the countryside.

'I've asked in restaurants and on building sites, but no one will give me the time of day. They only care about having work for

themselves. Here people are so proud. They could see someone dying on the floor and they'd just step over them. I almost wish they'd killed me too, rather than arriving here and being rejected and humiliated. You're displaced, and then in the city they kill you slowly.'

His desperation becomes almost unbearable at night.

'Sitting there in the dark, I think to myself, "This isn't fair." I had land, land I bought. And now I have nothing.'

And then, come morning, it starts again. Where to go? What to do? Yesterday, he toyed with the idea of hitching north and joining the *auto-defensas*, the illegal paramilitary groups set up to fight back against the FARC and the rebel groups like them. But he's decided that he's had his fill of violence.

The waiter starts flicking channels on the television. He settles on the afternoon news. A reporter's voice breaks into our conversation. We both turn to watch. The headline bulletin features the capture of six FARC members in an army raid. Álvaro looks away.

'If you live where I do, you know all the news is a lie,' he says despondently. 'They keep what is really happening a secret. The government says it is winning the war, but no one is winning the war. It just keeps going on. There are only losers. Personally, I don't think either side is really interested in winning. There are too many people with something to lose if it stops. It'll never end.'

At that moment, a uniformed soldier walked in. He sits across the room, next to the scowling office worker, and orders a coffee and a sandwich.

Álvaro clams up immediately. Visibly shrinking into his donated jacket, he begins playing nervously with his empty coffee cup. I put my notebook away and ask for the bill. We walk back to the Mennonite church. It was next to my tram stop, and, reluctantly, I tell him that I'd better get going. Does he know what he's going to do?

He'd heard the church ran programmes for *desplazados*, 'displaced people'. He's hoping they might be able to help.

I wish him the best, and we share an awkward farewell. Before I

go, I give him what's in my wallet. He offers me his lemons in return. I tell him to keep them: 'Buy yourself some papaya instead. But make sure they're ripe.'

We laugh. It's the first time I've seen him smile. We shake hands a final time, and then he sirs back down on the church steps, waiting for help to arrive. As I turn to go, he mutters a final thought, whether to himself, to me or the granite stair, I can't tell:

'The worst is that I don't know what they did with Guillermo. I don't know whether they buried him or threw him in the brook or just left him there. I just don't know. What am I to tell his mother?'

Before arriving in Colombia, I'd never heard the word *desplazado*. Until recently, it hadn't been a regular part of Álvaro's vocabulary either. Three days on, and he's still getting used to the term.

Before touching down in Colombia, I'd read a few books on its history. Writ large on every page is the same dominating theme: violence – raw, barbaric, blood-curdling, teeth-chattering, brain-twisting, heart-wrenching, mind-wincing violence.

The country's reputation for brutality dates back at least to the times of the Liberators. The War of Independence is reckoned to have cost a third of Colombia's adult population. The Liberators contributed their part to the carnage.

Bolívar notoriously declared *Guerra a Muerte* against his colonial adversaries. The edict was unequivocal. War to the Death. No royalist would be spared and no prisoners taken. 'Even if you profess neutrality, know that you will die,' Spaniards on South American soil were warned. He kept to his word. In 1814, a few months after this fatal declaration, he gave the order for thirteen hundred imprisoned royalist soldiers to be executed. It was not the Liberator's finest hour.

Even for the bellicose standards of his day, Bolívar's order represented a clear violation of martial etiquette and wartime norms. His apologists spare no time in lumping the blame on Spain's murderous battle tactics. The royalist soldiers were certainly no angels. Most had no compunction about raping and pillaging. As a strategy

of colonial dominion, the ruthless techniques were supposed to deter people from sympathising with the patriot rebels. In reality, such rough treatment only drove them more towards the anti-Spanish cause.

The colonists had their sadists too. Peeling the skin from prisoners' feet and making them walk on hot coals emerged as a particular favourite during the revolutionary wars. So did tying captives up in hammocks and burning them alive.

The most notorious psychopath of them all was an Asturian-born bandit who'd originally come to South America with Spain's merchant navy. José Tomás Boves's idea of entertainment was to kill pregnant women and have their stomachs cut open. He enjoyed watching the spasms of their unborn children. On one especially gory escapade, the deranged Spaniard entered the Venezuelan town of Cumana and ordered every last male killed. That much was standard. But then, as night fell, he corralled their women and forced them to dance. The jig over, his soldiers raped them and then executed them. The musicians got the chop too.

Not that the patriots were innocent either. The Liberator once had to severely censure a senior member of the patriot forces for issuing promotions according to Spanish scalps. Thirty and a cadet made it to lieutenant. Fifty and he was bumped up to captain. Bolívar sent message that the brutish system must be stopped immediately. He received two heads by return of post.

The Liberator later annulled the War to the Death, but the damage was done. The citizens of Gran Colombia had already acquired a taste for bloodshed. Before Bolívar's body was even interred, rival political factions would be bumping one another off in search of the spoils. In the second half of the nineteenth century alone, the independent Republic of Colombia would suffer thirteen blood-splattered coups.

If Colombians hoped the new century would bring a let-up in the terror, they were sadly mistaken. In fact, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, levels of savagery became so bad that historians simply refer to the period as *La Violencia*. The Violence.

Those bloodstained decades proved a marker post in Colombian hurchery. From armed men killing other armed men, civilians were dragged into the fray. A contemporary eyewitness report describes how federal soldiers sacked a rural village: 'They murdered [the inhabitants] and carved them up, little by little; they cut them into small pieces and the pieces jumped. When the sun rose there were bodies everywhere. They took a little child from a pregnant woman and they put one of its limbs in her mouth.'

Boves's perverted diversions evidently survived the generations. Grotesque massacres such as these turned out to be a warm-up for what was to come. Summary executions, disappearances, disembowelment, systematic rape, torture and group assassinations became the hallmarks of a civil war that had since torn Colombia apart. Over the past four decades, the country's bloody domestic conflict is estimated to have cost at least thirty thousand lives. With mass graves still turning up, the figure could well be more. As a rule, the left-wing rebel groups and their paramilitary enemies contented themselves with terrorising the countryside. That left the cities to the drug cartels.

In the days of Pablo Escobar, Colombia's most notorious *narco* and one-time member of *Forbes* rich list, the per-capita murder rates in Medellín and Cali were the highest in the world. Even the morgues of Somalia, which was swimming in blood courtesy of its own monstrous civil war, couldn't compete.

'The thing about men like Escobar is that they would kill so casually, it was just an everyday part of doing business,' a veteran reporter in Medellín told me one night over a beer. 'Many in fact are charming. When you speak with them, you have to remind yourself they are cold-blooded murderers who would as soon slit open your granny with a carving knife as look at her.'

If the official statistics are to be believed, then Colombia is at last getting safer. The drug cartels are no more (or no longer so evident); the paramilitaries have supposedly handed in their guns; and the rebel groups are allegedly on the run. Today, you're only twice as likely to get killed on the streets of Cali as those of Beirut.

If being killed is the most obvious way in which violence impinges on your personal liberties, then being kidnapped comes in second.

For much of the past decade, kidnap rates in Colombia have run at around three thousand victims a year. After cocaine-smugglings, hostage-taking counts as the next most lucrative industry for the country's armed groups. The left-wing National Liberation Army historically set the standard in the art of abduction. The guerrilla group once stormed a church in Cali during Sunday Mass and frog-marched all one hundred and fifty congregants into waiting trucks.

Less professional means are also used. Setting up a roadblock and nabbing passing motorists represents one of the old-time tricks. 'Miraculous fishing', the strategy was nicknamed, after Jesus's injunction that his disciples 'go and fish for men'.

More popular nowadays are targeted kidnappings. Compared to random motorists, wealthy businessmen constitute a far more lucrative catch. Children are also popular. Kidnappers find that parents tend to find the cash quickly. Another strategy for a fast payout is to send ears, fingers and other body parts in the post.

Less common are political hostages. Until recently, the FARC held around fifty such unfortunates. Most were public figures or members of the security services. They were worth more to the guerrillas as bargaining chips than bank notes. The most famous was ex-congresswoman Ingrid Berancourt. Daughter of a former Miss Colombia, the mother of two was seized in 2002 during a visit to a demilitarised zone in central Colombia. At the time, she was running for president. Her husband pledged to continue her campaign, but the public guessed they wouldn't be seeing her for a while. She ended up garnering less than 1 per cent of the vote.

My visit to Colombia brought fresh news of Ingrid through John Frank Pinchao. The emaciated policeman had been a guest of the FARC for eight years, six months and fifteen days. He'd given his guards the slip and spent the previous fortnight or more beating a path out of the jungle. He emerged with twenty worms under his skin. He also had with him reliable information about Ingrid. She was alive. At least, she was the last time he'd seen her several

months beforehand. Her relatives at last had reason to hope. The international campaign for her release picked up pace.

Then, a little over a year later, the remarkable happened. Ingrid was rescued. She and fourteen of her fellow captives had been travelling by helicopter from one rebel-controlled zone to another. The trip turned out to be an elaborate ruse. The pilots, dressed as international mediators, were really undercover army soldiers. Once in the air, they quickly disarmed the two FARC guards and pronounced the surprised hostages free. For a week, the daring rescue captured world headlines.

There's another means by which violence in Colombia deprives people of their liberties. Displacement may be less newsworthy than massacres and kidnappings, but it's far more commonplace. War-ravaged Sudan is the only country in the world that boasts more internal refugees than Colombia. Alvaro is just one of more than two million people who have been forced from their homes over the past two decades.

Lack of combat training and kidnap insurance dissuade me from hunting down the perpetrators of Colombia's violence. Instead, I decide to go in search of their victims, the *desplazados*, the silent collateral of Colombian savagery.

Medellin

From her back porch in Altos de Oriente, María Moreno has one of the best views in Medellin. She also has a plague of termites and rats that scuttle noisily across the floor at night.

She and her six children moved into the one-room house about a month ago. Their clothes are neatly parcelled on the three shelves of a tall, thin wardrobe. Black plastic sheeting lines the walls of her wooden framed house. It is supposed to keep out the wind, but it is only partially effective. Her neighbour tells her that sheets of newspaper would be better, but María has not had time to redecorate.

The roof, like the door, is made from corrugated tin. A handful of basic kitchen utensils are piled up on a low wooden bench beside a

rust-stained oven. Two beds are shoved up against one wall — one a single, the other a bunk. Both are metal-rimmed and resting on wooden blocks to prevent them sinking into the muddy orange floor.

Leo, her three-month-old baby boy, is lying on the bottom bunk kicking his legs in the air. There is no cot for him to sleep in nor a bath in which to wash him. Nor does the house show any signs of a chair, a mirror, a television, a photo on the wall, a book or even a shelf to put one on.

The cupboard-sized porch has a seat-less toilet at one end and a washing-up bowl at the other. A rubber pipe drips discoloured water into a red plastic bucket. The majestic view reveals itself through the cracks in the wooden plank wall. Damp children's clothes hang wherever space allows.

This is María's new home, six months after having to escape her old one.

A buxom black woman of thirty-three, María had been a witness at her husband's murder. Daniel, her eldest son, had seen it too. Apparently, her spouse of almost a decade had been mixed up with an armed group. María didn't know which one nor did the men who shot him deign to tell her. None the less, when they told her to clear out of town, she took them at their word.

The young mother caught the overnight bus with her children to Medellin. Arriving at the bus terminal, she approached a policeman, who advised her to go to the Centre for Attention and Orientation for Displaced People. The official-sounding building was located across town, and the family took a bus. The watchman was used to the sight of whole families arriving empty-handed at the entrance and ushered them through.

The centre reminded María of school, with its classroom blocks, high fences and sloping basketball court. She was directed to the main building, where she presented herself at the front desk. The attendant told her to go up the stairs to the second floor and wait. She sat in line for two hours as the children grew increasingly fidgety. They were hungry and frightened too. So was María.

Her name was eventually called, and she went through to the adjoining office. The room was divided into eight cubicles, each with a small desk and a computer screen. She sat at the one free desk, and a friendly woman on the other side took her through some questions. The woman typed while María answered what was asked of her. The questions were a government requirement, the lady explained. They would take a look over her case, and, all being well, she would be granted displacement status in the very near future.

'When?' María wanted to know.

'Oh, it shouldn't take long,' the administrator responded.

María's mind then turned to more immediate matters: 'Is there somewhere my children and I can spend the night?'

The woman's questions hadn't covered the issue of accommodation: 'You mean, you don't have any family or friends here?'

María knew no one. The lady then excused herself and went out to make some phone calls. She returned five minutes later. María was in luck. A family had just moved out of the state-run boarding house. She and her children could stay there. It was back across town.

According to the official regulations, the halfway house is only supposed to accommodate people for twenty-three days. With newly displaced people arriving in the city every day, the pressure on beds is extreme. A month is reckoned to be time enough for residents to find alternative lodging. But there had been a bureaucratic hiccup with María's neatly typed papers. As a result, her status and subsequent benefits were left hanging in administrative limbo. Added to that, she was seven months pregnant. In the end, they let her and her family stay five months.

Before visiting María, I'd paid a visit to the boarding house. Located on the corner of Calle Argentina and Calle 42, the building fronts onto a busy street full of traffic and pedestrians. A small gaggle of schoolteachers were staging a sit-down protest at one end of the block. Uniformed pupils were milling around as well, although they looked more interested in smoking than demonstrating their

solidarity. The noise of roadworks and car horns generated a steady, unremitting din.

The entrance to the boarding house was through a passageway of peeling paint, which gave out to an open patio at the back. The red and yellow tiled floor brought a splash of much-needed colour to the otherwise drab decor. A canvas awning stretched overhead to keep out the rain. What it failed to catch was collected in buckets at strategic spots around the room.

The hostel was overrun with yelling children, screaming toddlers and mothers struggling vainly to exert control. Many of the men were out, searching for housing or a job. In most cases, it's both they were after.

Two bedrooms ran directly off the patio, with more down the corridor and others on a second floor above. There were ten in total, with space enough for seventy-five residents. Each room was furnished with only the bare essentials, but for the most part they were clean and free of damp.

A staff member brought out milk and bread from the kitchen and for a minute or two the children fell silent, their attention absorbed by the morning snack. I used the break in the mayhem to ask the adults milling around if they might answer a few questions. The women stuck with the kids, but four men shuffled forward. Together we sat down at a round table in the corner of the patio; I with my notebook, and they with their stories of lives turned upside down.

Each of them had arrived in the city within the past month, and all but one were from Antioquia province, of which Medellín is the capital. Unlike María, they had eschewed the bus and instead hitched by truck.

Twenty-two-year-old Edison had had the longest journey. He hailed from a small village in Boyacá province, north of Bogotá. It was there, in 1819, that Bolívar's army had defeated the Spanish and won independence for Colombia. The trip to Medellín had taken Edison three days, the same length of time it took the Liberator to march from the battlefield to a hero's welcome in the capital.

Edison had taken flight to avoid joining the paramilitaries. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the right-wing militia would come through the village recruiting. The wage wasn't bad — 500,000 pesos a month — with home leave once a fortnight. For someone without a job like Edison, the money must have been tempting. But the thin, sporty young man was no warrior, and he repeatedly turned them down. The paramilitaries took his snub badly.

A month ago, rumours reached Edison that they planned to recruit him anyway, by force if necessary. So he took off. He'd not been able to tell his parents where he was for fear that his pursuers might come and find him. He missed his mum.

Twenty-eight-year-old Juan had a similar story. Retired from the army after seven years' service, he had moved back to his father's farm in Chigorodo, a small town in northern Antioquia. His credentials as a trained soldier earned him the attentions of both the paramilitary and the guerrilla recruiters. As with Edison, he declined their offers.

Then, one morning, a folded bulletin was shoved under the door of his house. It looked at first like junk mail. Juan opened it to find a neatly typed death threat. It was addressed to him and his extended family: either they left town immediately or their lives would be taken, one by one. The killers would start with the youngest, the unsigned letter threatened. Juan and his relatives escaped to Medellín the next day, all thirteen of them crammed into a pick-up truck.

Javier and Carlos also fled from the province's northern badlands. It was Javier's second experience of eviction in as many months. Two days before Christmas, he and his wife had been working at their sewing machines on the outskirts of the city. They had expanded their family-run textile business a few years beforehand, constructing a small workshop at the back of the house. Since investing in the extra capacity, orders had increased and business was going well.

The improvement in trade had not been missed by the local paramilitary group. Their money-collector, a gruff overweight man,

well-known in the neighbourhood, came knocking at the door. Normally, the monthly cut was 200,000 pesos. From now on, the sum would be triple that, the plump extortionist informed Javier. 'Market forces,' the local mafioso had said. 'Think of it as a Christmas bonus.'

Javier didn't have that kind of money, and soon the threats started coming. He and his wife decided to pack up and return with their six kids to the town of Apartadó, where Javier had once lived and where he still had some friends.

As he was talking, his wife wandered up and put her arms around his neck. She rested her head on his shoulder, and Javier took her hand in his. She was petite and, in her off-white school overall, looked barely out of school.

Soon after the family's relocation, two FARC members came to the house where they were staying. They told Javier they wanted to buy his ten-year-old son — so he could 'grow up to become a good guerrilla'. They said they'd pay, offering a one-off fee of 1.5 million pesos, roughly the cost of a second-hand moped.

Javier was desperate, but not that desperate. It fell to the family to pack their bags again and return as refugees to Medellín.

As for Carlos, a roasted-peanut-seller in his former life, it wasn't the armed groups that sought to recruit him. It was the police. They wanted him as a witness to a murder. Five months previously, he'd seen a man stabbed to death in an alleyway near his house. The police called him in for questioning, but he'd been unable to identify the perpetrator. Last month, his neighbour had been killed. Again, the police hauled him in to testify, and again he had nothing to give them.

The criminals were less convinced of his silence. At 3 a.m., eight armed men surrounded his house. He was given five minutes to pack a bag of clothes for his two daughters before being thrown out on the street. They told him never to come back. He wasn't planning to.

As I returned to my hostel in Parque Bolívar, I was hit by the senseless cruelty of it all. It took me a full day to pack for my trip.

There was the extra memory card to buy, the jeans to pick up from the laundry and the piles of clothes to whittle down. These people had a matter of hours, often only minutes, in which to collect together all their worldly belongings.

Worse still, most weren't even the principal protagonist in the drama, just uninvolved relatives or incumbent children. Sometimes they didn't even know *who* exactly it was they were running from. But they knew *what* it was: it was the thought of a stranger hanging around the school gate waiting for their child; it was the heavy breathing down the phone line; it was the midnight knock on the door; it was the gnawing fear that at any time, anywhere, *they* could get you.

Nor are the *desplazados* necessarily safe once on the run. Back in Bogotá, I'd met a female community leader who was still receiving threats two years after escaping her guerrilla-controlled town. In the past twelve months, she'd been forced to move twenty times to different locations around the capital. I'd also spoken with a man under the government witness-protection programme who had sought refuge in Chile. Even there, his persecutors had tracked him down.

Fortunately for María, she has suffered no such repercussions. But the nightmares have not left her. Every night, the image of her husband's killers comes back to haunt her. The stress of the past six months has also brought on stomach cramps and blinding headaches. At the boarding house, she'd been to see a psychologist. He had given her some tranquillisers but advised that the best thing to do was talk openly about her experience. She had done her best to do so.

All my questions, she said, were helping her: 'It's like therapy.' Her comment reminds me of a sign I'd seen back at the centre. 'Silence increases pain - talk.' A helpline was given below. Daniel won't be ringing it. At fifteen years old, María's introverted son had suddenly found himself the man of the household. The once outgoing youth now spends most of his days in the cramped, one-room house. He helps his mother with the younger children and the

household chores. Once they're settled in, she hopes he'll find a job.

María frets about how taciturn and insular he's become. Dropping out of school hasn't helped, she admits. His new responsibilities no longer allow for regular classes, and he goes to an adult-education centre on Saturdays. The opportunity to find new friends is slim. Everyone else is at least twice his age. What Daniel needs is interaction with other teenage boys, friends with whom he can play football or hang out in the park. What displacement has left him is precisely the reverse. Anyway, Alros de Oriente has no park.

I ask what María does for food, and she points to a cardboard box beneath the kitchen utensils. It's stamped with the logo of the United Nations-backed World Food Programme. Under Colombian law, all newly displaced people are entitled to emergency relief for three months.

Back in the displacement centre, a large warehouse is given over to storing boxes like María's. A chart on the wall lists off what a family of six should receive per month. The bulk of it consists of rice (10 kilos), beans (4 kilos), maize (5 kilos) and tuna (seven tins). Into the box also go packets of powdered milk, pasta, salt, coffee, sugar, noodles and sardines. Not the most inspiring diet, nor the most protein-rich.

With several children under ten years old, María is eligible for a three-month extension to the emergency rations. Even so, with seven hungry mouths to feed, the rations don't go far, and María is often left relying on leftovers from neighbours. But she is not one to grumble. The displacement centre had also provided her with bedding, pots and pans, toiletries and clothing.

All these handouts were part of her legitimate rights, the centre's administrators had informed her. Soon after her displacement, she'd attended an orientation session to learn more about these purported rights of hers. She had left with a nine-point sheet and a healthy dose of scepticism. Her doubts were not misplaced.

A few years ago, Colombia's highest court ruled that the Government wasn't meeting its constitutional obligations towards its displaced citizens. Since then, more money has been earmarked

for the problem. But it still falls woefully short. By the government's own admission, only around one in three displaced children has access to adequate health and education services.

María is by no means alone. Four out of five families in Altos de Oriente are victims of forced displacement. They are among the ninety-five thousand internal refugees who have flocked to Medellín over the past decade. Situated in a mountainous bowl, the city has nowhere to expand but upwards. Hence the proliferation of shanty-town communities on the highest ridges of this heavily urbanised valley. As with María's new home, most are ramshackle, precarious affairs.

On the night before my visit, heavy rains washed away several houses in the hills west of the city. Seven people died in the mud-slide, five of them children. María constantly worries about something similar happening to her and her family. As it is, the children all have colds and the baby is suffering from a wheezing cough.

'They want to know when we are going home to our own house. What am I supposed to tell them?'

I had no answer for María. She'd had longer than Álvaro to adjust to being a *desplazada*, but adapting to her new status wasn't proving easy. I travelled north to learn about the road ahead of her.

North Antioquia

In Muratá, the slum at the bottom of the town is called El Progreso, or Progress, an optimistic name given the circumstances.

Roughly eight hundred families live in the ten-block neighbourhood. All have been displaced from surrounding provinces. For water, they rely on a communal pumping station. It functions for four hours in the morning and two in the afternoon. The water is only good for washing. Drinking water needs to be bought by the bottle. Electricity supplies are erratic and sanitation services abysmal.

The cramped single-storey houses become so hot during the day that people spend much of their time sitting outside. Unemployed

men gather together at the three or four kiosks that operate in the neighbourhood. Run out of the residents' own homes, the stores are little more than large front windows looking out onto the street. Usually the proprietors put out a few plastic chairs for their customers.

For want of a better alternative, the shops act as popular meeting places for El Progreso's army of bored and unoccupied men. They plonk themselves in the seats and lounge there idly. Some order beer. Most buy nothing. Permission to hang out is not provisional on purchase. Occasionally, someone pulls out a deck of cards and they play a round or two of *aracón*, a popular game in these parts. In general, though, they spend their time chatting and exchanging friendly insults between one another. Their objective is to while away time, to see yet another day through from start to finish.

While I am wandering around El Progreso's damp, unsanitary streets, Carlos Alberto sidles up to me. He introduces himself as a member of the neighbourhood committee and offers to show me around. A jovial, moustached man who I guess to be in his late forties but could be older, Carlos proves to be a popular man. As we walk, he waves at people on their doorsteps and ruffles children's hair. There is no one whose name he doesn't know, a familiarity that even extends to their pets. Then that's not so surprising. Living in such close quarters to one another, everyone in El Progreso knows everyone. Privacy comes at a premium here.

Carlos fills me in a little about the shanty town's history. Most of the residents moved to the town ten years ago. They came en masse, fleeing a spate of 'disappearances' and massacres unleashed by the paramilitaries. At first, they'd lived in tents. Carlos has been slightly better off than most. He'd disassembled his old house in the countryside and managed to salvage enough materials to build himself a rudimentary shack.

'From that start, anything is progress. Hence the name.' He laughs. It must be a well-worn joke.

Now the houses are made from wood, and all have concrete foundations. The number of jobless is also going down. At the

beginnings, more than nine out of ten people couldn't find work. Now it's half that figure.

Despite the improvements, I ask Carlos if he would prefer to go home. Since the paramilitaries handed in their weapons, reports of forced evictions and arbitrary killings are down considerably. He says he would but that it's impossible. He used to work as a peon on a sizeable estate. As part of the deal, the landowner gave him a plot of land of his own.

'It was just a casual agreement, you see. There were no papers or anything like that.'

He still gets on well with his ex-employer and not so long ago went back to discuss the possibility of returning. The problem is the house. Since Carlos' dismantling job, there isn't one. His former boss says he doesn't have the money to build him a replacement. And Carlos definitely doesn't. His weekend job at a transport yard barely provides him with enough to get by, let alone to construct a new home from scratch.

Many other displaced Colombians find themselves in a similar situation. As former farm hands or migrant *colonos*, they lack official title deeds to the land where they used to live. Under Colombian settlement legislation, land ownership should technically pass to new colonisers after five years of productive occupation. The law underpins the frontier feeling in much of rural Colombia. Every year, migrant farmers push further and further into the country's vast uninhabited interior. But to enact their legal entitlement requires all sorts of paperwork – paperwork that most never get round to doing.

María Cervantes, a forty-one-year-old grandmother and permanent resident of El Progreso, has a different problem. She and her husband sold their land. Rocking in a chair on her doorstep with her grandson in her lap, she says she still rues the decision. But at the time, she had felt backed into a corner. She and her family had abandoned their two-hundred-and-fifty-hectare farm after the deaths of half a dozen neighbours at the hands of the paramilitaries.

'Soon afterwards, men started turning up in the refugee camp in

Mutará. They said they were representing people interested in buying up our land. We had fled with almost nothing, so we ended up selling. I so wish we hadn't.'

María obtained a fifth of what her property was really worth. Added to that, the middlemen took a 20 per cent commission. Now her land is covered in African palm, the boom crop in this tropical corner of north-western Colombia. Others didn't even get to negotiate.

'In many cases, the paramilitaries would just turn up, accuse you of collaborating with the guerrillas and order you to sell your land to them,' Carlos chips in. 'Deal with us today,' they used to say, 'or tomorrow we'll be dealing with your widow.'

Despite such threats, a handful of brave souls still attempt to return. Many are simply displaced a second time. Others are dispatched more permanently. Yolanda Izquierdo is a case in point. A virulent campaigner for the resettlement of *desplazados*, the mother of five was recently gunned down on the patio of her home. The assassination occurred in Montería, three hundred miles north of Bogotá and the birthplace of the paramilitaries.

Only a few days before her death, Yolanda had testified against Salvatore Mancuso, a paramilitary hard man wanted for all manner of atrocities. A 'death foretold' is how one human-rights representative put it. Her slaying came several weeks after the murders of two other notable land activists. All three deaths are attributed to the paramilitaries. As part of a general plea bargain struck with the government, demobilised paramilitary members are being promised lighter sentences in exchange for confessing their crimes and returning the property they have appropriated. Many don't much care for the second clause.

Luis Olvidio will not be deterred though. He was once the proud owner of one hundred and seventy hectares of prime arable land outside Mutará. A decade previously, paramilitaries had killed his father-in-law, prompting him to leave. Seven months ago, he decided to move back.

I'd heard about Olvidio through a human-rights worker back in

Bogotá and, over a crackly phone line, arranged a visit. His house lies a two-hour drive from the town down a bumpy country road. No buses travel the route, so I hire a rusty jeep to take me.

We trundle out of town, across the swollen river. Sucio and through fields of fruit-laden banana plants. After an hour, we hit the first army checkpoint. Two soldiers, both in their early twenties and dressed in battle fatigues, step out from behind a wall of sandbags. Since the paramilitaries' demobilisation, control over this blood-soaked region has passed over to the Colombian armed forces. The armed privates order me out of the jeep, check my passport and enquire after the purpose of my visit. They don't buy my story about 'seeing the countryside', but they can't find anything illegal about it and so let me pass.

After a second checkpoint twenty minutes up the road, the palm plantation starts. For five kilometres, the view from the road is reduced to the stumpy fat trunks and arching, vertiginous fronds of African palm. The trees look like huge sprouting pine cones, row after row after row. Olvidio's farm lies down an overgrown track at the plantation's perimeter. The view from his front door is the same.

Olvidio is standing on his porch when the jeep pulls up. He's a giant of a man with a barrel chest and, as I couldn't help noticing, an unusually extended belly button. Wearing no shirt and with a towel thrown over his shoulder, he's just returned from his morning wash in a nearby stream. He greets me warmly and shouts out back for some breakfast.

Busying herself in the open-air kitchen at the rear of the house, Olvidio's wife soon appears with a bowl of steaming fish soup and fried yucca. She's dressed in a ragged T-shirt and a long skirt hitched above her bulging stomach. Her hair is speckled with white and face etched with the wear and tear of a gruelling life. Their two young girls are also at work, mucking out the pigsty.

On a bench in the kitchen, silently darning a pair of frayed socks, sits Olvidio's widowed mother-in-law. The old woman's snow-white Afro is tied into two pigtails that hang limply from the side of her head. They remind me of the floppy ears of a Dobermann.

The house itself is a two-storey wooden structure. It looks basic, but sturdy. I ask Olvidio when he'd built it. He didn't, he says. A local Colombian palm company constructed it in his absence. That firm had since sold his land to a larger palm-oil producer.

Staring out at the lines of mature African palm, the imposing Afro-Colombian is bemused by all that has happened: 'This latest company says it has legal papers for the land, but I don't know how that can be as I have titles dating back twenty years.'

From Olvidio's original farm, only a space as large as a football pitch escaped the palm invasion. On his return, the industrious homesteader set about clearing. It took him and his two teenage sons months of back-breaking work to complete. He was planning to grow plantain, maize and yucca, just as he'd always done. But the company beat him to it. They ordered in their workers and planted over Olvidio's freshly prepared plot with palm. It was a sending-off offence, but the gormless soldiers at the checkpoint were the only referees present. Olvidio didn't bother appealing.

Later, I would put a call in to the National Federation of Palm Oil Producers to see if Olvidio's experience was common practice. I was patched through to the trade body's general director, who was at the organisation's national conference in Cali. He'd sounded mildly frantic. Numbers were through the roof for this year's meeting thanks to a government proposal to use palm oil for biodiesel. Suddenly everyone wanted a slice of the windfall.

Biofuels already have a bad reputation in much of South America. Land once devoted to growing crops and raising livestock is being supplanted by soya, palm and the other vegetable ingredients for modern agro-fuel alternatives. Food is scarcer and prices higher as a consequence, the critics argue. Now biofuels have displacement to add to their rap sheet too.

The director would go on to admit that the palm boom had indeed attracted its rogues. Illegal land expropriations were, he confessed, 'lamentable'. In his defence, he'd suggested that Colombia's banana and sugar industries had been doing the same for decades. Still, I was interested to know who these palm companies might be.

The director said he'd rather not name names but insisted that they were most definitely not members of his prestigious federation.

Olvidio is only too happy to pass on the company's details. He just sees little point in doing so. An international human-rights group has taken up his cause, but he's not confident they'll meet with success. For every one hundred cases of forced displacement, on average, one reaches court. Far fewer obtain a guilty verdict. In the mean time, Olvidio is reduced to taking his rowing boat up the nearby river and chopping down trees in the forest. He sells the timber to local builders. He knows it's illegal, but he says he'll take his chances: 'It's not as if the law has much of a presence around here.'

Lawlessness is a common complaint in rural Colombia. Whole regions such as Olvidio's have been left for decades without sight or sound of a policeman, let alone a judge. Armed rebels have historically been the only reference point. They hold the weapons, so they make the laws. 'Arms will make you free, but laws will bring you liberty,' Francisco de Paula Santander, the post-independence president of Colombia, had once said. The law of the gun turns that early ideal on its head.

Not all legal custodians opt for the law's heavier hand. Olvidio and others like him have an inspirational role model in the Nasa. One of the more numerous of Colombia's eighty-five native people groups, the Nasa have staged one of the most remarkable resettlements in recent Colombian history.

I first heard their story through an excited Peace Corps volunteer, who thought them the perfect model for Colombia's path to post-conflict reconstruction. Spread across the foothills of North Cauca, two hours south of Cali, the Nasa have been the victims of one land grab after another. Eventually, they decided enough was enough. As a collective group, they marched down the mountains and seized back part of their traditional territories. At the beginning of the 1990s, their exercise in mass squatting obtained legal sanction. Under a new national constitution, parcels of tribal land were earmarked for indigenous reservations.

Earlier in my Colombia trip, I'd taken the bus from Cali to see

how the experiment was working out. I was dropped off in the quiet town of Santander de Quilichao and from there caught a truck up into the mountains to Canoas. Home to around six thousand people, the indigenous settlement commands a spectacular view across a lush, forested valley. The reservation consists of isolated wooden houses stationed sporadically over the hillside.

Gernán Valencia showed me round. A well-built man with a crew cut, he is head of the Nasa's non-violent community guard. He was sporting a long fawn poncho and carrying a wooden staff decorated with green and red ribbons.

'The staff is a sign of authority in our community. Whoever holds it must be listened to,' he'd told me, deadly serious. I wasn't about to argue.

The guard boasts four thousand representatives. Without their permission, no one can enter or leave the Nasa communities. They also provide shelter for Nasa's *desplazados*, preventing the victims of violence from fleeing to the cities. Gernán shows me round Canoas' communal safe house. It's located in a sprawling hacienda with multiple bedrooms, a flourishing vegetable patch and a balconied veranda looking out across the valley. The house used to be the holiday home of a Cali drug baron until Gernán and his guards peacefully reappropriated it. Due to a lull in guerrilla attacks, the displacement centre has been converted into a temporary correction centre for the community's criminals. It must be the only prison in South America with no guards, no bars and an outdoor swimming pool.

To win back the remainder of its ancestral lands, the Nasa of North Cauca have mapped out a plan. It goes under the rubric of 'Project Life'.

'The large landowners have a "Project of Death" designed to destroy us,' Gernán explained, 'so this is our response.'

Protest marches, campaign letters and legal action are their weapons. For the Nasa, the fight is more than just a battle for ownership. It's a struggle to liberate the Earth. Mother Earth cannot be free, the Nasa teach, while private interests exploit her for personal gain.

'While she who gives us life is kept enslaved, then we, her children, who respect her and live with her, also remain slaves,' the local figurehead had said, pounding the ground powerfully with his staff. The Nasa have spoken.

El Progreso. Project of Life. These are optimistic names indeed.

Cartagena

I headed up to Cartagena de Indias on the northern Caribbean coast conscious that my time in Colombia was drawing to a close. I had been told the country was on the road to peace. Parts of it, I suppose, were. If I'd struck to the salsa clubs of Cali or the shopping malls of Medellín, perhaps I could have persuaded myself it *all* was? But behind the bright lights and talk of business buoyancy, there is no hiding the ravages wrought by four decades of interminable conflict. Families are torn apart, lives are lived in fear, and hundreds of thousands have lost their homes.

I had little confidence that this colonial port town, the old stomping ground of Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel García Márquez, would change my perspective. When Bolívar visited in 1830, the Liberator had bemoaned the abundance of beggars on the streets. 'What good has this damn independence done anyway?' he supposedly inquired of the city's governor. In a matter of weeks, Bolívar would be dead, going to his grave with Cartagena's vagrants in the forefront of his mind.

The homeless are still there, loitering around the Mercado de Bazarro and sleeping rough in the Parque Centenario. I take a room in the tatty Getsémani district of the Old Town. Bolívar's list has since expanded to include prostitutes, drunks and crack-dealers. That's not to demean the charms of Colombia's UNESCO World Heritage Site. Even with its army of down-and-outs, Cartagena well deserves its status as one of the colonial jewels of South America. I follow the guidebook's instructions and spend two days losing myself in the winding historic streets of the walled city. I visit the baroque domed cathedral, people-watch from charming pavement

cafés and hunt out Parque Bolívar for a photo of the Liberator's statue.

Done with sightseeing, I telephone Patricia Guerrero. Her name had been given to me by a local journalist working in Bogotá. 'Go and meet her,' was all she'd said on learning about my interest in the *desplazados*. And so it is that, early on a Monday morning, I find myself knocking at an unmarked door down one of Getsémani's labyrinthine side streets.

A young man with a goatee beard answers and shows me into the spacious headquarters of the League for Displaced Women. Conference flyers and international awards litter the walls. He directs me up a narrow staircase to the office of *la doctora*, the doctor. She sounds frightening but couldn't be less so.

An attractive woman in late middle age, she's sitting at a large desk by an open window. The breeze is ruffling her papers, which are piled unsteadily like pillars of jenga bricks across the table. She apologises. She's just adding the final touches to a new research report. The league is lobbying for the demobilised paramilitaries to be made to confess their crimes against women.

'How many of the women who were murdered or displaced were raped first? Nobody knows. The State doesn't care, and the paramilitaries aren't interested in telling us.'

Before I have a chance to ask a question, she starts reading the headline facts from the report in front of her: incidences of verbal abuse, torched homes, beatings, mock executions, forced sex, unwanted pregnancies. It's all quite harrowing for a Monday morning.

'Isn't there any good news?' I finally get to ask.

'Good news? Yes, of course, just go visit the City of Women.'

An hour later, a bus from the city limits drops me off at the front door of Eidanys Lamadrid's home. Her house is located on scrubland off the main highway, eleven kilometres south of Cartagena proper. From the outside, it's unremarkable: a rectangular-shaped bungalow built from floor to low-hanging ceiling from ugly, concrete blocks. The seventy-eight-square-metre floor plan – divvied up

between two bedrooms, a kitchen/living room and one small bathroom – is identical to that of her ninety-six neighbours. The City of Women looks and feels like a soldiers' barracks. There is no church, no supermarket, no park and, as yet, there are no street names.

But it is the first permanent home that Eidanys has had for almost a decade, and she is rightfully proud of it. Inside, there is little room to move, what with the three-piece suite and bulky dining table. Her two daughters are sitting with friends watching a DVD on the new television set. Everything down to the liquidiser is bought on credit.

She makes no apologies for splurging. In Colombia, there's a popular saying, she tells me: 'He with no house is very poor. He with a house is very rich.' Despite not having a *peso* in the bank, Eidanys is, in her mind at least, suddenly very rich.

Eidanys even likes the breeze blocks. She should do because she helped make them. Working from morning till night at the community kiln, she and her women companions produced twelve hundred bricks a day. After six months, they had enough to start building their new homes.

Since moving in a year ago, several of the women have established micro-enterprises around the City. One lady rents out her washing machine by the load. Others run small stores from their homes or make handicrafts to sell to Cartagena's tourists. The kiln is also still operational, making bricks for sale to the local construction market. Eidanys's mother has even opened a small restaurant.

Thirty-four-year-old Eidanys credits Patricia Guerrero for much of the miracle. The *doctora* badgered local officials and buttered up foreign donors to raise the money for the housing project. More importantly still, she pushed the women to start believing in themselves.

Eidanys is the first to testify to the change in her own self-perception.

'Years ago, some of my neighbours and I tried forming a committee of displaced women. But we didn't know our rights nor what organisations should be helping us. The authorities just ignored us

and pretended we didn't exist. Then Patricia came, and we entered the league. That's when we started getting training about our rights and about how to empower ourselves. Now when we go to the government offices, we know what we are entitled to, and we won't take no for an answer. They don't try and fob us off any more like they used to.'

I am reminded of her shift in mindset later in our conversation. We're chatting in her kitchen when my eye settles on a handwritten card above the sink. It exhorts the reader to forget the mistakes of the past and fight for great achievements in the future.

The league gave similar notes to all the new house-owners, Eidanys explains. She agrees with the general sentiment, although she doesn't like the word 'mistake'.

'Being displaced is never the victim's "mistake". It can never be. It can never be our fault!'

For many of her new neighbours, the journey towards self-belief has been harder. Displacement is the common theme that links all ninety-seven households in the City of Women. Many still carry the trauma of having witnessed family members killed or their worldly possessions set on fire. A large number of the City's residents have been widowed by violence. Others have separated from their menfolk during the tough years following their displacement.

As we stroll around the freshly laid streets, Eidanys points to various houses and the abuses that their owners have suffered. The cases sound much the same as those from the *doctora's* list earlier that morning. Several are survivors of the El Salado massacre.

She fills me in on the details as we continue our walk. The incident takes its name from a village in Bolívar province. Salvatore Mancuso and his men invaded the supposedly FARC-friendly hamlet eight years ago. The paramilitary brigade stayed three days. They had with them a man in a hood. The disguised snitch went from house to house identifying alleged guerrilla sympathisers. Anyone he pointed to was shot on the spot. Mancuso's men had rigged up a sound system by the town football pitch. With the sound of every bullet, they turned up the volume and danced.

Thirty-nine people were slaughtered in total. Everyone else was forced to flee. It was José Tomás Boves all over again.

Eidanys' running commentary also suggests that violence against women does not end with displacement. Life in the urban slums often brings with it domestic and sexual abuse. At least half a dozen of the City of Women's residents have been raped since leaving the security of their homes. Others have seen their children turn to drugs, petty crime or prostitution.

I put down my notebook, my writing hand growing sore with so many stories. Eidanys notices me tiring and suggests we go and meet a friend of hers. In her late forties, Julia carries a permanent worry line between her eyes. We chat for a little while about her new house but soon the subject turns back to the hardships of displacement. It was the culture shock that she found most traumatic at first. I ask if she can elaborate.

'It's simple,' she responds. 'In the countryside, a woman's role is carefully mapped out between housework, motherhood and a little agricultural work near the house. Generally we have nothing to do with money matters, political involvement or other things touching on the world outside the home. That's the men's business.'

When Julia came to the city, she found work in a restaurant washing the dishes. Employment, albeit in menial domestic jobs, is easier to find for a woman than it is for a man. Generally illiterate or sub-literate, the curriculum of a displaced farmer isn't going to feature the education or experience that a company is looking for. Odd jobs and day labouring is often the best they can find. Many men end up withdrawing into themselves, Julia says. Over time, the responsibility for the emotional and economic welfare of the family shifts to the womenfolk.

Eidanys is a rare exception in the City of Women in being both married and having a husband with a job. It's not much, she says, just as a caretaker for a firm in town, but it pays for their bills and monthly hire-purchase quotas.

He even supports her taking part in the league. 'Not that he ever thought they would achieve anything,' Eidanys snorts. 'He always

used to tell me that my job was to stay at home and look after the kids.'

The feisty *mulatta* had made her spouse eat his words. Now, she says, the men feel excluded because their names don't appear on any of the City's documents. To help their husbands through their feelings of disenfranchisement, the women have contracted a male counsellor to run a monthly 'masculinity' workshop.

'As *campesinas*, our role was never recognised,' Eidanys remarks. 'Now, at last, we are realising our rights.' And don't their menfolk know it.

Not everyone goes to the workshops. Resentment among the male-dominated local elite remains fierce. The mayor in the nearby municipality of Turbaco has yet to visit them.

'If you resist instead of submitting as everyone else does, then you're a threat to the powers that be,' Eidanys states matter-of-factly. The league has formally denounced the Town Hall for corruption. Public funds for the *desplazados*, they claim, have disappeared into the mayor's pockets and those of his cronies. The women now have the mayor up on an incompetence charge. Twice they wrote to him asking for greater police protection after various incidences of intimidation. He told them they were exaggerating. Several months later, a 'freak' fire burned down the City's community centre.

'They tried to say it was caused by an electric fault. But that's impossible. The electric cables had been stolen the previous month!'

The fire is the last in a series of attacks, dating back to the assassination of Julio Miguel Pérez two years previously. A victim of three separate displacements, the father of six was planning to move to the City of Women with his wife. To show his solidarity, he offered to guard the brick factory at night. His daughter had found him lying dead in the street when she came to bring him his morning coffee. He'd been killed with a machete. There has been no arrest nor, as far as his widow knows, any investigation into his murder.

I ask the women why Colombia is so prone to such terrible, repeated violence. They both shrug their shoulders. No one else I've

spoken in my travels around the country seems to have a convincing answer either. Some blame violent segments in society: the guerrilla, the paramilitaries, the Army, the drug-dealers. Others find fault in the system: poverty, poor education, police corruption, inflexible social structures, legal impunity.

Bolívar, in contrast, blamed the Spanish. The colonists' barbarity had to be met with greater barbarity. Is Colombia today at the bottom of a self-perpetuated downward spiral? Is this where an eye for an eye leads? A country accustomed to the horrific, blind to peaceful means? It seems far-fetched. Yet so does killing a man because his wife and her friends are building a home for themselves.

We leave Julia's house, and Eidany's walks me to the bus stop. As I wait for my ride back to town, the City of Women's indomitable resident tells me about the upcoming public assembly. She and her female companions have decided it's time to name their streets. They're thinking of naming the main avenue after Julio Miguel, in memory of their murdered companion. Eidany's knows what she wants to call her own street: Calle Dr Patricia Guerrero.

In the heroines of Cartagena, Bolívar finally had an unexpected answer to what his damned independence had achieved.

Santa Marta

The Liberator was in no mood for being inspired in the days before he died. By the time he arrived up the coast from Cartagena in Santa Marta, he only had a month to live. His outlook for Colombia was grim: 'This country will fall inevitably into the hands of the unrestrained multitudes and then into the hands of tyrants.' The FARC and their foes have proved it a prescient prediction.

Bolívar had left Bogotá seven months earlier, resigning the presidency of the country and committing himself to a life in exile. The journey from the capital took him up the river Magdalena towards the Caribbean Sea. They were months of growing anguish. He stood by in the sidelines as new leaders arose and fought among themselves for their corner of the liberated continent. The last leg of

his trip saw him taken by horse and cart to the hacienda of Joaquín de Mier, a pro-republican Spaniard who lived just outside Santa Marta. The intention was to recover his failing health before setting sail to Europe.

In *The General in his Labyrinth*, Gabriel García Márquez's fictional account of the Liberator's final few months, it's a disillusioned Bolívar weighed down by 'lugubrious thoughts' who arrives at the outlying ranch in the village of San Pedro Alejandrino. Factions are prising apart his vision of a united South America. Attempts are being made on his life. Tuberculosis is eating away at his lungs. Lying in his borrowed bed, with the clairvoyance of impending death, García Márquez imagines him 'shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortunes and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finishing line'.

As I walk around de Mier's former estate, I too try and conjure up an image of the Liberator in his last days, drugging himself with herbal palliatives, arranging his personal effects, giving instructions to his loyal servant José Palacios, writing a last letter to his beloved Manuela and dwelling at length on his legacy.

Bolívar, more than anyone, knew what it was like to belong to a place, and then not to. He understood what it meant to invest in building something, only to see it snatched away. He died homeless and almost penniless, outside his country of birth and heading into exile. Yes, I think Bolívar could have empathised with the likes of Alvaro, María, Carlos, Luis Olvidio and Eidany's.

Yet, Bolívar's last thoughts were not focused on individuals but on the countries he'd liberated. Aware death was only hours away, he longed to preserve what remained of his legacy. The words of South America's greatest-ever statesman are today etched onto the wall of the outbuilding where he died. I take out my notebook and note them down:

'I aspire to no other glory than the consolidation of Colombia. You must all work to the inestimable good of the union: the people offering their obedience to the current government in order to save themselves from anarchy.'

Conflict-ridden Colombia had clearly failed. I jump on a bus to Venezuela and the home of the 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Maybe there I will have more hope of finding the dreams of the Liberator realised?

OPERATION BOLÍVAR

Venezuela and revolution

The fundamental principle of our system demands that equality be immediately and exclusively established and put into practice in Venezuela . . . We have the right to expect that happiness will be the legacy Venezuela bequeaths her citizens.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, 'THE ANGOSTURA ADDRESS'

Los Rastrojos

Lourdes has spent a lifetime of dusk-filtered evenings just watching. Several years ago, when cataracts began eating away at his sight, they packed him off to Cuba. The eighty-one-year-old was bundled onto a charter flight to Havana, hosted for a week without charge and examined by a bevy of eye surgeons dressed in creased white lab coats.

Unfortunately, his octogenarian eyes ended up being too deteriorated to operate on. Lourdes' ability to see is shrinking by the day. Yet the old man is philosophical about growing blind. He's already seen a lifetime of seasons come and go, he says. What's another springtime? He can hear the mockingbirds and smell the jacaranda blossom. Besides, he's happy to have been on an aeroplane before he dies.

Habits being what they are, Lourdes still sits out on his porch to watch the world go by. His outdoor haven constitutes a narrow strip of crumbling concrete, no wider than a pavement. A large, inverted oil drum occupies the far end. Its spherical bulk looks to be anchoring his prefabricated house to its moorings. Strewn across its surface lies a colourful collection of half-empty glass bottles. Their labels are blanched yellow by the sun. The writing suggests that the functions of the upended barrel extend to medicine closet and drinks cabinet too.