

PBI Colombia (English)



LAND: CULTURE AND CONFLICT

STARTING OVER IN LA EUROPA

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Damaris lives in an improvised shack. Tree trunks hold up the corrugated metal roof, from which are hung shoes, machetes, caps and even a cage containing a rabbit, making the most of the small space. Hens run on the earthen floor and dogs sleep under the red plastic chairs. During stormy nights like this, one half-loose metal sheet bangs against another and the noise becomes unbearable. Damaris can no longer bear to stay in bed, so she gets up and turns on the small TV to distract herself. She waits anxiously for the early morning light, but there are still some hours to go. These storms are always frightening because they could make the roof fall in. Despite the noise, Damaris' three children sleep peacefully in the only bed the family owns. The sound of thunder reminds her of that dark time in the past when bombs fell from the sky and she ran, pregnant and with her little ones towards the forest in search of refuge. Even though it all happened more than twenty years ago, she can still smell the forest burning.

Damaris lives in the La Europa farm located in the Montes de María region. In the 1990s the area was a strategic region for both the guerilla and the paramilitaries. They fought for control over the Gulf of Morrosquillo because the port located there was an important place for the Colombian export routes and for cocaine trafficking to the United States; in addition, the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline ends in this area.[1] To Damaris' misfortune, the region had become "one of the most terrifying in the country." [2] This violence led to 56 massacres in the Montes de María, almost four thousand political murders and 200,000 displaced persons.[3]



The violence resulted in 56 massacres in the Montes de María region, as well as almost four thousand political assassinations and 200,000 internally displaced persons.

At that time Damaris' mother Gladys, lived in a mountainous area away from the farm. The guerilla often passed through and ordered the inhabitants to "prepare us some food!" "There was no way to avoid them, we had to do what they asked", Gladys remembers. She still gets shivers when she thinks of this chapter in her past. "One lot would leave and another would arrive". When the people who lived up in the mountains travelled down to the village the guerilla would warn them "you know what will happen if you say anything to the soldiers". The army started to treat them as though they were members of the guerilla. One day Gladys' husband and their children were sowing corn when forty soldiers arrived and ordered them to lie down on the floor, then they kicked and stamped on them. "Even today just thinking about it I can still feel the fury and the nerves", confesses Gladys with a shy smile.

The war intensified in 2001 and by then almost all of the families had abandoned the farm. Gladys had also left the area, going to Ovejas, the closest village, where she slept with her children on the concrete floor until someone gave them hammocks. When the war died down, Gladys, Damaris and their neighbours went back to the farm. They arrived with nothing, their houses had gone,

they had all been burned down during the years of war, and all the animals had gone too. They had to start over.

At that time the owner of Arepas Don Juancho appeared, he was known as the “Boss from Medellín”, and he offered them money to buy the La Europa farm lands. And although it was little money – 800,000 Colombian pesos per hectare – many families sold their plots, desperate and worried about their economic situation.[4] After that, workers from Arepas Don Juancho arrived with bulldozers, barbed wire, and tractors with tools and cement to start building.[5] Alarmed by the situation, the farmers stood firm with their machetes in hand to prevent the entry of the materials.[6]



Damaris dreams of an easier life for her daughter; that her little one will have a land title to prove that the land is hers.

Lack of legal guarantees

Thus began a legal fight for the La Europa farm. The farmers maintain that the farm belongs to them, since the government had awarded the 1,324 hectares to 114 small-farming families in 1969. They also claim that they are victims of forced displacement and that those who sold their lands did so under pressure and at an unfair price. Erika Gómez from the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CPDH), who represents the community in their legal process for land restitution, assures that the sale was illegal. “The Prosecutor General’s Office has never opened investigations into the actions of Incoder officials, who were apparently involved in the negotiation with the owners of the Arepas Don Juancho company”.

In 2013 the community presented its case before a Specialised Land Restitution Court, two years later the case was transferred to the Higher Land Court in Cartagena, and in 2017 a judge declared the case to be null and void.[7] “Now we have to start over again and this implies that the community has not been protected by the law,” says the lawyer with concern.

Whatever happens, the inhabitants will have to wait until the trial ends and in the meantime, their lives are in limbo. They cannot think about long-term development for the community. “Why would we want schools if the land has not been given to the farmers?” Asks Gilberto, 48, who is Damaris’ husband and a charismatic leader with a sophisticated political philosophy.

It is a discouraging situation for leaders who have been struggling for so many years, land rights leaders who have already paid a high price: years of exile, threats and attacks on their lives. In 2014 there was an attack against Andrés Narváez,[8] in 2016 another against Argemiro Lara[9] and the danger is such that the Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office warned about the risks to which the rural population of La Europa, due to the presence of armed men, and asked for special protection from the Police and the Prosecutor General’s Office.[10]



Land conflicts in the Europa Farm. Illustration: María Fernanda Lessmes

Being a campesino is not sustainable

La Europa could be a paradise, says Gilberto. He inspires admiration and it is difficult to believe that he only had access to primary school education. Gilberto knows every corner of the farm because he has spent almost all of his life there.

“Here there are native forests, white-faced monkeys, martens, armadillos and agoutis”, he says with pride. And until the 1980s they grew tobacco, corn, yams and sesame seeds to sell. There was even a cassava mincer until 1994. Every month they took a small lorry full of cassava flour to sell in Medellín, Gilberto says with nostalgia. The high-ceilinged factory is still standing and it is easy to imagine the splendour of those times. Today a family occupies this formidable space that now contains just a television and one hammock.



Now that the Free Trade Agreements are being implemented, the small-scale farming economy is breaking down. Last year they were paid six thousand pesos for a kilo of corn, today it is worth 400 pesos; a bundle of yams used to sell at 140,000 pesos, today it is worth around 10,000 pesos. [11] That does not even cover production and transport costs. Because of this situation, Gilberto has not sold his crops for three years. What he has left over he gives to his neighbours. “We have tried to get farmers to grow produce for their own consumption, to raise pigs and plant yucca to fatten them with, to plant corn to make arepas, to keep hens for their eggs.” For Gilberto, exchanging agricultural products at the local level is their only chance of survival under these circumstances.

It is a hard life; In addition to all of the above, the lack of water is overwhelming. From very early in the morning until dusk, men and boys ride the long roads on mules to the springs and wells and

bring back the water they need for their homes to wash clothes and cook. Stomach diseases are common because the springs are contaminated, say the farmers. The workers from the Arepas Don Juancho company take their cows there and they urinate in the springs.

In spite of everything, Damaris is excited because she has a hectare of land. She points up to the mountain where workers are clearing the land. Soon they will be able to sow corn, she says with optimism. She is bent over the wood fire, and soon the workers will arrive to eat their lunch. Her small daughter wants to help, but she tells her off because there is a pan full of hot oil on the fire to fry plantains. "You could burn yourself on that", she tells her daughter. It starts to rain again and Damaris serves herself a sweet coffee and sits down on one of her plastic chairs next to her daughter, who is now watching a cartoon on TV. She dreams of an easier life for her daughter; that her little one will have a land title to prove that the land is hers.

Text and photos: Bianca Bauer

Footnotes:

[1] Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica: Una nación desplazada, 2015

[2] Ibid.

[3] Verdad Abierta: Como se fraguó la tragedia de los Montes de María

[4] Verdad Abierta: [La Mula, la Europa y la otra Alemania](#), 1 September 2010

[5] Interview with Gilberto

[6] Op. Cit., Verdad Abierta: [La Mula, la Europa y la otra Alemania](#)

[7] Speech by Erika Gómez, Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CPDH), October 2017

[8] El Espectador: [ONU condena atentado contra un líder campesino en Sucre](#), 23 June 2014

[9] La SillaVacía: [Atentan contra vida de líder de tierras en Ovejas](#), 19 November 2016

[10] El Herald, [Campesinos de La Europa, en riesgo por grupos armados, dice Defensoría](#), 7 May 2016

[11] El Espectador: [Montes de María con el ñame hasta el cuello](#), 7 August 2017

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