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To go forward, Colombia looks back

Colombia's independent Historic Memory Group hopes that airing the country's grisly past can help end the decades-old war.

By Sibylla Brodzinsky | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

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Trujillo, Colombia - For workers in this small town, Father Tiberio Fernández was a unifying force who helped them fight for their rights. For paramilitary chiefs and government forces, he was a rebel collaborator and a threat.

In 1990, he was kidnapped, tortured, dismembered, and dumped in a river, one of 342 victims in what came to be known as the Trujillo Massacre.

For years, most families of the victims of Colombia's four-decade-old civil war have quietly grieved and vented their anger among themselves.

Now their stories have become national news after last month's 300-page independent report on the Trujillo Massacre, the first of many intended to tell a fuller story of Colombia's hidden past.

In fractured, often uncoordinated, ways the victims – as well as former leftist guerrillas, former right-wing paramilitaries, and academics – are now reconstructing this nation's brutal history. Normally, this type of truth-seeking happens at the end of a conflict. Fear of retribution is a powerful silencer. But Colombians can't wait for peace.

"Society is demanding this now," says Gonzálo Sánchez, a renowned historian who leads the Historical Memory Group that compiled the report. He says Colombians want the truth and want to honor the victims.

Building an accurate record before a civil war is over poses a unique set of challenges. Prosecutions and truth-seeking before the end of a conflict have occurred elsewhere, such as in Darfur and Uganda. But these trials have been held in international courts and efforts to establish a record of events have been minimal.

Here, however, the urge to establish the truth is gaining momentum, even amid new murders, disappearances, kidnappings, and bombings. More than 10,000 leftist rebels remain at war, and many of the once-demobilized 30,000 paramilitaries are picking up arms again. Colombia is also in the process of trying some 3,000 former paramilitary and rebel fighters.

The result, in these strong crosscurrents, is often a messy affair.



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"It's very hard to have the truth come out when the conflict is still in play," says Ginny Bouvier of the United States Institute of Peace, a congressionally funded organization in Washington. "It has a silencing effect on the population."

Mr. Sánchez acknowledges that many of the stories being made public by perpetrators and victims are only half truths. Often those who have dared to tell the whole truth have been threatened, killed, or coerced into changing their story. "The history that is being told is being told under threat," he says.

But Sánchez defends the effort. "Normally this type of effort marks the last step of a peace process to end a conflict," he says. "But maybe here it can be a starting point to a peace process, why not?"
More than a monument

In Trujillo, the first step toward seeking a personal peace was the construction of a terraced monument for victims' families to remember their loved ones. Beneath each name, relatives sculpted bas-relief images representing each person and what he or she did in life.

The monument is an effort by the families of the victims to keep the memory of their loved ones alive. But for survivors, remembering their own isn't enough.

"Constructing memory is about the desire to be recognized [as a victim] and understood by the people around you," says Louis Bickford, an expert on truth-seeking for the International Center for Transitional Justice in New York, an organization that assists nations in accounting for atrocities. "It is also an attempt to assure the nonrepetition of the crimes."

It's something Colombia has never done before, even after the bloody partisan war known as "La Violencia, or "the Violence" from 1948 to 1958 that claimed an estimated 200,000 lives.

When La Violencia ended, Colombia turned the page and looked forward, leaving victims' families bitter and angry and demanding justice.

"This is a country that was accustomed to ending its conflicts with wide-sweeping amnesties and pardons," says Sánchez. "The idea of victims barely existed, the dead were dead and that was it." That's now changing. The Historic Memory Group has tallied 2,505 massacres in which 14,000 victims died between 1982 and 2007. The government has registered more than 145,000 deaths and disappearances, as well as more than 3 million internal refugees.

Under the so-called 2005 Justice and Peace Law, hundreds of demobilized paramilitary fighters and rebel deserters are confessing to thousands of those crimes in exchange for reduced sentences. This, observers say, is working as a catalyst for victims who are reporting their version of events for the first time.

Even though the conflict staggers on, the law presents "new opportunities to break the cycle of impunity," says Juan Mendez, president of the International Center for Transitional Justice in New York.

But the way victims and victimizers remember history often differs greatly. Sometimes, because of the official setting of the confessions, the former fighters are given more credence than to those who survived their crimes. That makes for what Sánchez calls the "asymmetry of history."

A victim confronts his attacker

At the Bogotá headquarters of Colombia's attorney general one recent morning, Miguel Páez waits impatiently to see the woman who ruined his life.

When Elda Neyis Mosquera – or "Karina" as she is known – is finally ushered into a court hearing room surrounded by bodyguards, he rushes up to her and growls: "Look at me. Remember me. Remember that you castrated me."

Karina, a former commander of a leftist rebel group who surrendered in May, bows her head and is whisked away to continue her confession of crimes committed during more than 20 years in the guerrilla movement. Some of her victims sit in a nearby room to watch a live video feed of the proceedings.

During the hearing, Karina denies having even been present in the region at the time of Mr. Páez says he was maimed by her. "That's not true. It was her," he says to others watching. "Her version cannot stand," says Páez, gritting his teeth. "I know my truth, and I will tell it to anyone who listens."

The 'battle for history'

Mr. Bickford at the International Center for Transitional Justice underscores the importance of giving value to the victim's versions. "If the victims do not tell their stories, the victimizers win the battle for history," he says.

On Oct. 1, in a court in Colombia's second-largest city, Medellín, Ana Eugenia Rojas narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips as she watched a live video feed of a former paramilitary commander who admitted to ordering the killing of her son, Edgar Quiroga. But he described Edgar as an important rebel commander. "He was no guerrilla," she said. "They wanted him dead because he was helping farmers fight for their rights. That is how he needs to be remembered."

Despite the different versions of history, there are some details only the victimizers know, such as where the bodies of their victims are buried.

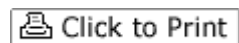
Confessions from paramilitary and guerrilla fighters have helped Colombian government investigators uncover the remains of 1,689 people from 1,389 clandestine graves this year.

On Oct. 3, investigating prosecutor Alonso Alvear added seven more bodies to the tally.

Early morning clouds cling to the hills as Mr. Alvear leads a team of forensics experts, escorted by dozens of police, over mud tracks deep into the countryside of Colombia's banana-producing Urabá region to a village called Nueva Antioquia.

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