



LAND OR DEATH COLOMBIA'S INDIGENOUS LAND DEFENDERS



A Film by Sebastian Peña Rojas & Jesper Klemmedsson Sotomayor

STUDY GUIDE

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Land or Death: Colombia's Indigenous Land Defenders

After the Colombian government and the FARC signed a peace agreement in 2016, there was hope that the five decade-long armed conflict had come to an end, but Colombia has become one of the world's deadliest places for land rights defenders. Arm criminal gangs, including ex-FARC members, emerged in the power vacuum and fought for control. A tenacious grandmother, Celia, leads an unarmed indigenous civilian force that fights to defend their land. She is one of the highest-ranking members of an indigenous civilian defense force in the dangerous region. Celia longs to rebuild her troubled relationship with her family, but violence has returned to the area. When a close comrade is assassinated, Celia is forced to mobilize her community. It's an incredibly perilous task, as the Guards are entirely unarmed, but they are resolute and determined not to give in: "We have to make them understand that the control is ours and the territory is ours - that we, as indigenous guards, will always be in this territory."

About Colombia

The Republic of Colombia is in South America, bordered by Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, the Caribbean Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. Colombia is a republic, and is governed by a president, a Senate, and a House of Representatives. The country's population is approximately 52 million, and its official language is Spanish. Colombia has a diverse geography, which includes tropical areas, rainforests, and mountains. The country is also one of the most biodiverse in the world.

About The FARC

From 1948 to 1958, there was civil war in Colombia as a result of conflict between liberals and conservatives in the country's government. This time is often referred to as *la violencia*. An agreement was eventually signed to end the conflict, however, many small farmers believed that the government was ignoring their concerns, and instead favoring wealthy landowners. In 1964, a Marxist guerrilla organization was created to fight back against this perceived inequality. The organization called itself the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which is an abbreviation of the Spanish *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, and its goal was to overthrow Colombia's government. FARC was attractive to many people because it offered a sense of community and a potential escape from poverty, and it quickly grew from only a few hundred members, to thousands. However, FARC also used extortion, kidnapping, and money from the drug trade to help finance its operations. The U.S. government added FARC to its list of terrorist organizations in 1997, not removing it from the list until 2021.

The conflict between FARC and the Colombian government continued for 52 years. According to the World Economic Forum, "It's Latin America's longest-running uprising." During that time hundreds of thousands of people were killed, tens of thousands disappeared, and millions displaced due to violence.

In 2016, after numerous unsuccessful attempts, a peace agreement was finally reached between FARC and the Colombian government. Under that agreement, FARC members disarmed and were

reintegrated into the community, and the Colombian government promised to invest in rural development. In addition, FARC became a political party called the Revolutionary Alternative Force. As stated in the agreement, it is guaranteed five seats in the House of Representatives and five in the Senate until 2026. Finally, the peace agreement also included the formation of a transitional justice system (JEP) for the purpose of finding justice for the victims of the conflict.

Results of the Peace Treaty

There is disagreement over how successful the peace agreement has been. Not everyone in Colombia has supported it. For instance, many members of Colombia's civilian population have been opposed. Some FARC guerillas also disagreed with it, and have kept their weapons and continued to fight.

In addition, many people believe that the government has been slow to implement the agreement. According to a 2021 report by the United Nations Secretary-General, "At the current pace, it is estimated that implementation of the Final Agreement would take 26 years, as opposed to 15 years as originally planned." Many rural communities also charge that the government has not followed through on its promises to invest in rural development.

Another critique is that Colombia still has a high level of violence. One major cause of this violence is drug traffickers or other gangs fighting for control over areas that were once controlled by FARC guerillas. Human Rights explains that rather than stopping the violence that has plagued the area for years, the 1996 peace agreement simply changed it. It says, "Violence took new forms and abuses by armed groups increased in many remote areas in later years, reaching similar levels in 2022 to those that existed immediately before the peace process." The organization goes on to explain the current situation, stating, "Numerous armed groups operate in Colombia fueled by illegal economies, including drug trafficking and illegal mining. These include the ELN guerrillas, which was formed in the 1960s; over 30 'dissident' groups that emerged from the 2017 demobilization of the FARC; and the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), which emerged from the demobilization of paramilitary groups in the mid-2000s." It says, "Armed groups continue to commit serious abuses against civilians, including killings, child recruitment, and rape. . . . Security forces and judicial authorities have failed to effectively protect the population, ensure victims' access to justice, and prosecute and dismantle the groups."

Cauca

Cauca is an area in southwestern Colombia. According to Minority Rights Group International, this area is home to two main indigenous groups: the Paéz, also known as Nasa, and the Guambiano. It reports that there are 264,389 Paéz people in the area. Minority Rights Group International finds that many of the indigenous people living in Cauca have historically been displaced from their land, but are now actively involved in reclaiming it. The group also reports that Cauca's indigenous population face significant, ongoing violence. In fact, it says, "Cauca remains one of the deadliest regions for Colombia's indigenous leaders. By the end of 2019, according to the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), there had been at least seven massacres, 127 targeted killings,

32 assassination attempts and hundreds of cases of serious threats against indigenous activists in Cauca alone.”

The Indigenous Guard

The Indigenous Guard—or Kiwe Thegnas—was created in 2001 in Cauca. According to a report by the Pulitzer Center, it is a nonviolent group that does not carry weapons. In a report by Cultural Survival, the authors explain, “The people who serve in the Indigenous Guards are unarmed and act as mediators. They monitor who enters and leaves Indigenous territories, facilitate dialogue, and seek to de-escalate violent conflicts.” The report also explains that being a member of the Indigenous Guard is dangerous, stating, “Many of the members have survived multiple threats and attempts at their lives, yet they continue to strive for peace.” According to the Pulitzer Center, another thing that the Indigenous Guard does is to train children throughout the region, so that these children will learn how to protect themselves and their land, and will be less likely to be recruited by armed groups. According to Minority Rights Group International, there are 13,000 Indigenous Guard members in Cauca, and 60,000 across the country. It says, “Tactics include calling upon hundreds of community members of all ages to swarm around armed groups and seizing their weapons.” The Guardian reports that since the 2016 peace agreement, numerous members of the Indigenous Guard have been killed in conflicts with gangs and other armed groups.

In 2020, the International Human Rights Organization Front Line Defenders named the Indigenous Guard of Cauca as the 2020 Americas Regional Winner of the Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk. Front Line Defenders Executive Director, Andrew Anderson said, “The Guardia represent a unique model of collective protection in one of the world’s most dangerous places to be a human rights defender. Throughout years of the armed conflict, the Guardia offered an unarmed, peaceful defence of their community, traditions, culture, way of live and Mother Nature. Despite the peace agreement, HRDs, including the Guardia, continue to face lethal attacks and extreme risk. This award acknowledges this uncommon courage for the entire Guardia collective.”

Additional Resources

Books

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Contact

For inquiries, please contact:

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