



Leyner Palacios Asprilla: A Vision for Peace

Peace in Colombia is in a tenuous place. Leyner Palacios, an Afro-Colombian social leader from Bojayá, believes the atmosphere is worse than it was leading up to the 2002 massacre in his hometown. This episode explores the problems undermining peace in Colombia after the historic 2016 peace accords, and how the work of social leaders is crucial in keeping peace alive.

Darryl Chappell:

Welcome to Rebuilding Peace. This series from the Washington Office on Latin America will share the stories of social leaders in Colombia who, every day, under threat to their lives, search for truth and work towards reconciliation, fight for justice for victims of the Colombian conflict, and ensure the government lives up to the guarantees it made to ethnic and rural communities in the historic 2016 peace accord. Social leaders often face off with a Colombian government that refuses to admit its failures and they stand up to armed groups terrorizing their communities. Hundreds of them have been killed, yet they persist. In this series you will hear why, directly from them.

Hello, my name is Darryl Chappell. As a philanthropist and retired business executive who has worked and advised humanitarian organizations like WOLA for years, I am invested in the expansion of possibilities for Afro-descendants and marginalized communities in the Americas. My tenure as a WOLA board member connected me to the stories of social leaders in Colombia.

These social leaders' fight for peace, many of them Afro-Colombian and Indigenous, resonates with me personally as a Black man living in Latin America. I am inspired by people like Leyner Palacios, who is finding ways to address truth and reconciliation after decades of violence. People like Danelly Estupiñan, who has uncovered corruption and fought back against those who would displace her community for profit. People like Erlendy Cuero Bravo, who provides essential services to her community during a pandemic, despite multiple threats against her life. People like Dario Mejia, who is a part of a global, growing Indigenous rights movement. Their voices need to be heard and it's time for us to find new ways to support their work and protect their lives.

I will be hosting the English version of this podcast, Rebuilding Peace, alongside Divalizeth Murillo, who will guide Spanish listeners along the same story.

Divalizeth Murillo:

Hello, my name is Divalizeth Murillo. I am an Afro-Colombian journalist, born in Buenaventura, Colombia. I will be your host for the Spanish version of this podcast, Construyendo La Paz, where you can listen to these social leaders speak in their own voices.

Together, we are crossing barriers of language and borders to fight for peace in Colombia.

Chappell: Colombia's historic 2016 peace accord is a remarkable achievement. For five decades, Colombia was mired in a deadly conflict. More than a dozen guerrilla groups battled an aggressively militarized Colombian government that often partnered with brutal right-wing paramilitary groups.

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Chappell: The conflict encompassed decades of atrocities, crimes against humanity, and abuses of international humanitarian law, some of which are still being documented today. According to Colombian government data, nearly 200,000 people died in targeted killings, civilian massacres, and more. Another eight million were displaced.

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Chappell: Then, in August 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace deal with the FARC, the most prominent of the guerrilla groups. It was the first promise of peace in 50 years.

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Chappell: The FARC agreed to lay down its weapons, demobilize and become an organized political party. The government, in turn, promised to advance commitments to tackle the root causes of the conflict: inequality, poverty, and injustice. The United Nations reports that more than 13,000 FARC guerrilla members put down their members. Homicides in the country decreased to historic lows, according to police data. But five years later, Colombia's peace is disintegrating.

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Chappell: According to Colombian NGO Indepaz, in 2019 there were more than 70 massacres by armed groups across the country, the highest number since the signing of the accords. More than 220 human rights activists were killed. Ethnic and rural communities, for whom the grasp on peace felt more tenuous every day, suffered the greatest impact.

Why is peace in Colombia faltering and what can be done to strengthen it? To begin to answer those questions, we have to understand that the story of the Colombian peace accords is not the story of what was agreed to by the FARC delegation and the Colombian government in 2016. It's the story of how peace is implemented in a country that's deeply divided along urban-rural, racial, economic, and political lines. And understanding the implementation of peace requires understanding the everyday people carrying it out. They do this work in the "other Colombia:" the Colombia of Afro-descendent and Indigenous communities; the Colombia of billion-dollar development projects that decimate entire neighborhoods; the Colombia where drug trafficking groups still reign.

Leyner Palacios is a social leader in Colombia's Pacific Coast. Social leaders are community activists and human rights defenders. They take on the grassroots work of building peace in communities still reeling from the physical and emotional scars of a 50-year conflict.

Leyner Palacios:

There are different versions of Colombia. They are living through a prolonged 20-year humanitarian crisis that we can't overcome. And no matter that we take action, we act, tragedy continues, and things get worse. And over there, there's another Colombia, which is the Colombia of the Pacific Coast, where we have the development of Buenaventura.

And development in Buenaventura is to tell the people of Buenaventura that there is water for the port, but not for the people.

But if you want, we can consider another Colombia. How much violence exists in these places and how many interests operate there? If you take the peace accords and overlay it on a map of Colombia, the greatest impact of the implementation of the peace accords is in these territories. That's why I say that here, the lack of implementation is explained in discrimination against those very territories.

Chappell: To understand why peace is faltering in Colombia, we must travel far from Bogotá or Medellín, cities that were rarely central to the conflict. We must travel to the other Colombia. Places where the conflict raged for years and where today, social leaders are fighting to implement peace on a daily basis.

Social leaders like Leyner are best qualified to lead us. In this case, Leyner's from Bojayá, an Afro-Colombian enclave shaped by tragedy.

Palacios: 19 Afro-descendent communities and 32 Indigenous communities make up the municipality of Bojayá. In total, 11,000 people live there. The only way to go to Bojayá is by flying from Bogotá to Quibdó, and from there, take a motorboat, we call these fiber boats "panga," over the water for four hours. It's incredibly biodiverse. You'll find vast quantities of natural resources here. Some say that the humidity is so much that simply standing still could lead you to rust. It rains intermittently. Here, you can have a day-long downpour, torrential rain. I think it's the place with the second most rainfall in the world. But it can be raining one moment, and then you'll have an incredibly strong sun that burns you to your core.

Chappell: Bojayá is a community in Chocó, a state on Colombia's Pacific Coast. According to Colombia's census, more than 80 percent of residents are Afro-Colombian. Colombia's statistics agency notes that Chocó has some of the highest rates of extreme poverty in Colombia, despite the fact that it's one of the most biodiverse states. A number of rivers run through it, with the most prominent being the majestic Atrato River. It's on its shores that you'll find Bojayá.

Palacios: It's a happy citizenry. We live for Chirimía, the local dance. It's very rhythmic and folkloric. And I think it's what allows people to overcome so many troubles. There is so much happiness and diversity, so that's how people overcome in the middle of so much difficulty. It's a happy community, a humble community.

But the sound that you hear the most is that of the birds, the nature, the tranquility, the water, the current. It's very common, for instance, in the Indigenous communities, that one takes a nap while being serenaded by the currents. It's the noise of the river that makes the environment and the sound of nature.

Chappell: But Leyner says he's not describing the Bojayá of today. It's one of nearly two decades ago, before paramilitaries arrived here.

Palacios: Bojayá today is... Well, that Bojayá that I told you about is Bojayá before 2002. Truly, that Bojayá is... We need to go back to 1996, 1997, when life began to change, when we had the first paramilitary incursion.

Chappell: Right before 1996, Bojayá and the state of Chocó as a whole, were undergoing a radical transformation. In 1991, after centuries of Colombia defining itself as a Catholic, Hispanic,

and Spanish-speaking nation, a new constitution officially recognized the multiethnic and multicultural nature of the country. This new constitution granted Afro-Colombians, Indigenous, and other ethnic groups increased visibility and more rights. Two years later, a new law granted Afro-Colombian communities the right to make collective claims on ancestral lands. Their rights to occupy and manage land they'd lived on for generations were finally secured.

Palacios: In 1996, we presented a request for a collective titling of 800,000 acres of land, and in May of that year the response was a paramilitary incursion on our territory. I say that because for us, it's very important that any reading on what happened in the armed conflict, we need to correlate it, or we need to view within the context of the ethnic communities revindicating their rights.

Chappell: At the time, Leyner was starting off as a social leader for his community in Bojayá. He was traveling up and down the Atrato River, helping communities take advantage of their new rights to own the land they lived on. He was also trying to find a way to build peace in the middle of an escalating conflict.

Palacios: I remember in that time, I was just starting at the mission, and I saw how the communities were suffering. And honestly, our job was just to document what was happening. I remember one day, when I was on my way to bring aid to the communities, a group of paramilitaries asked me to get on a boat. Back then, when they asked you to get on a boat, whoever got on that boat was killed. That is one of the moments that I have firmly in my mind. By 2000, we started up with the fight for the implementation of an ethnic development plan, and in 2000, we presented a proposal to the national government of how we wanted to live in our communities.

But also, despite all the violence, we brought forward a proposal for a regional peace agenda, an initiative to mitigate the conflict and bring some humanitarian relief to all that misfortune that we had started living in 1996, 1997. Those proposals were ignored.

Chappell: The 2002 Bojayá massacre changed everything. Leyner spent that April trying to convince the government that the situation was precarious.

Palacios: It's worth mentioning that before April 30th, I was a part of many commissions on behalf of the Diocese of Quibdó, together with civil society organizations like COCOMACIA, the Interethnic Forum. I went to multiple meetings with various national government entities to let them know what could happen.

In April, the Colombian military finds out what's happening in Bojayá: the presence of paramilitaries, the presence of FARC guerrillas, and we put out so many statements and releases, but the institutions did not respond. And then, the paramilitaries surrounded Bellavista.

Chappell: Bellavista is the municipal head of Bojayá. Starting on April 21st of 2002, right-wing paramilitaries surrounded Bellavista because the FARC guerrillas were nearby. Nine days later, on April 30th, the first shots between paramilitaries and FARC guerrillas were fired.

Palacios: I remember that on April 30, I was in my house with my family when, at 5:00 AM, we began to hear the first gunshots. So then, when the gun fight started, what we did is that we hid under two mattresses, but the bullets passed through those mattresses. That's how we spent the 30th. And then on the 1st, at around 11:00 AM, the gun fight was really strong, and

we were in the middle of all the battles, then we realized we were no longer safe there. So, we said, "We have to leave."

So, at around 1:00 PM, I left my house in the Pueblo Nuevo neighborhood. The town was flooded, and we left, went into the water, and started walking through the water. We passed the church, and the church was open, but since I had more of a relationship with the Augustine nuns, I sought refuge in their convent. That's where we stayed.

Chappell: By the morning of May 2nd, 2002, Leyner, along with his family and about 140 others, were taking shelter in the convent. Other residents sought refuge next door in the church. Leyner helped organize a group of people to make one last, desperate attempt at peace.

Palacios: We formed a group of five people from the Augustine convent, and others from the church, and we went to where the paramilitaries were shooting to ask them to leave because they were putting us in danger. We couldn't do that with the guerrilla, because the guerrilla were shooting towards us. The paramilitaries wanted us as a human shield, so their reaction was to bring out a big gun and start unloading it like crazy. So, we said, "My God, they're going to kill us!" And some of us went running into the church, and others went running once again into the Augustine Sisters convent. While we were there, I remember that I started writing with a sister. I started writing in a notebook because it was no longer possible that they would find us alive. So, basically the idea then was to leave behind our story, so that when the aid agencies arrived, someone would know what happened to us.

Chappell: Then, the unimaginable happened.

Palacios: And we were writing. I had about a page written describing what had happened up until that moment when I heard, or we heard, an explosion. "Boom." And the sky got dark. And when we started to see some people running, and we looked back and saw that the church no longer had a roof... The roof was destroyed. And we saw the disaster and we began to see injured people running. People with wounds on their heads, different mutilations, people who had arrived there and we saw them okay, and a little while later they were falling there on the ground.

Chappell: The FARC guerrillas had thrown a grenade into the church. Leyner and the rest of the town fled amidst the ensuing gun fight. Using boats, many of them eventually managed to cross the river to a nearby town called Vigia del Fuerte. Hundreds of civilians remained in Bojayá, either dead or injured. Leyner was compelled to go back for some of the injured.

He and other leaders went to see the head of the guerrilla forces. Leyner says they begged him to let them return to Bellavista. They pleaded with him to stop the standoff long enough for them to get some of the injured out.

Palacios: They didn't let us. So, for me, May 2nd is like a day. I mean, the moment that my work as a human rights defender was the most challenging. The most challenging because of the impotence, because really my work as a human rights defender is to find a way to protect life, and that day none of the armed fighters let us save lives. I always say if I could have maybe gone into the church at a more opportune moment, if the aid agencies would have been permitted to enter, maybe a lot of people would have been saved. But that wasn't possible. We were only able to move the injured on May 4th.

Chappell: Leyner counts 86 people killed during the massacre, including 48 children. 32 of those killed were his relatives. According to Leyner, another 5,700 people were displaced by the massacre. They fled to the capital city of Chocó, Quibdó, where they remained for months. Leyner's work took on added urgency: find the displaced, put them in touch with authorities so that they could get medical and psychological help. Many of the displaced did not trust anyone in the city. They relied on social leaders like Leyner to get them much-needed help.

A few months later, his family and hundreds of others returned to Bojayá. His role as a social leader grew. Families and individuals still needed help dealing with the trauma. Many of the bodies of the victims had yet to be identified. Over the next decade, Bojayá continued to suffer attacks from paramilitaries and the FARC.

But one day, the rumor of peace reached the shores of Bojayá, and Leyner decided to go meet it.

Palacios: I was in the first delegation of victims that traveled to Havana to tell our story of building peace. In fact, we began to place conditions and we began to see how the FARC delegation began responding to our concerns. The conflict in Bojayá was still raging in 2014. However, the FARC began slowing the intensity of the conflict in the territories. And so, we began advocating a lot more, and it was a hard fight to get ethnic rights included in the accord, but we managed something. I think it has been a success in how the rights of victims were integrated into the accord. It wasn't a perfect accord, but it was an accord that had a lot of guarantees.

Chappell: According to Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, a long-time Colombia expert at the Washington Office on Latin America, the inclusion of victims and ethnic groups in the negotiations was instrumental in building a comprehensive path to peace.

Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli:

This is a peace agreement that one of its uniqueness is that it involved having six different victims' delegations go to Havana, where the peace was being negotiated between the two parties and giving their recommendations and ideas to both sides about what should be in the peace accord.

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Chappell: The ideas from victims' delegations, including Leyner's, were integrated into the final version of the accord. These included incorporating international human rights law into the accord to investigate massive human rights abuses and setting up mechanisms by which victims could seek truth, justice, and reconciliation for the decades of atrocities they had suffered.

Sánchez-Garzoli:

So, you can really say that it's really the people's peace accord, both in terms of the victims, in terms of the rural Colombians, in terms of Afro descendants, Indigenous, as well as the point of view of women and girls.

Chappell: The impact of the peace accord was felt immediately in communities like Leyner's. For example, one of the conditions of the peace accord was that the FARC remove dozens of anti-personnel mines they planted around Bojayá during the conflict.

Palacios: You cannot imagine what that means for a campesino, that we can say, “Man, I can go sit in my ranch again and cut myself a banana bunch,” especially when people here live day to day from what nature provides. So, that was one of the changes. Historically, due to the presence of the FARC, when people went into the mountains, they went with fear and many people were losing the enthusiasm to even cultivate. So, imagine the happiness and how the women sang the happiness, the great happiness that one feels with disarmament. It’s like you’re coming back to life, especially when you realize the chain of death we’ve lived. It was a moment like being reborn. We reactivated all our hopes and dreams.

Chappell: Leyner went to work. He set up community meetings to pitch the value of the peace accords to his neighbors. He convinced young people to leave FARC and seek a different path. He redoubled his efforts to identify the remains of the dead in the massacre. He joined the Inter-Ethnic Truth Commission. Their goal is to find and tell the truth of what happened to the ethnic communities during the conflict.

Palacios: We committed to peace like no other part of Colombia.

Chappell: For a while, it seemed like peace was building. Social leaders like Leyner had secured the inclusion of important elements of the peace accord. They were eager to use these new tools to build peace in their communities.

Sánchez-Garzoli:

So, the peace accord was set up to be an integral peace accord. In other words, it has multiple chapters that are all interconnected with each other. Among the most important ones are that it basically takes care of some of the longstanding root causes of conflict.

Chappell: Gimena highlights four specific elements of the peace accord that social leaders like Leyner were using to build peace: a rural reform chapter meant to address deep lying issues of land tenure, illegal land grabs, and concentration of land; rural development mechanisms that ensure that long-forgotten communities can build infrastructure, services, and the networks needed to build democracy in remote areas; a system to achieve truth, justice, and reconciliation; and the Ethnic Chapter, which is supposed to be transversally applied across the entire accord.

Sánchez-Garzoli:

When it comes to truth, justice, and reparations for victims, when it comes to the drug portion of the peace accord, all of those need to be differentiated for vulnerable populations that have been disproportionately affected by the conflict, which are mainly the ethnic minorities.

Chappell: Undergirding these promises was the most fundamental promise of all: after centuries of ignoring ethnic and rural communities, the state was poised to provide basic services in these forgotten areas. But stubborn political opposition got in the way. After the peace accord was signed, an ill-timed national referendum asked Colombia’s citizens to voice their opinion on the peace accord. Forces opposed to its implementation, composed primarily of economic and political conservative elites, mobilized aggressively.

Sánchez-Garzoli:

They did a very, very loud campaign, and managed to win the plebiscite, saying no for the peace by a very small margin. But they really don’t represent the majority of the population

of Colombia and they certainly don't represent most of the areas hardest hit by conflict, nor the Afro-Colombians, Indigenous, victims, and other Colombians' points of view.

Chappell: In Bojayá, 97% of the residents voted in favor of the peace accord during the national referendum. Other regions of the country recovering from the conflict approved the peace by overwhelming margins. Despite the slim victory for peace accord opposition, which was concentrated in urban areas, the Colombian government proceeded with implementing peace.

But then a new president was elected in 2018.

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Chappell: Iván Duque, Colombia's current president, centered his campaign around full-scale opposition to peace accord implementation in Colombia. According to Gimena, since taking power two years ago, Duque has fulfilled his main campaign promise.

Sánchez-Garzoli:

So, the lack of implementing peace has real life and death consequences for most of the rural Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities throughout the country. In other words, people who are defending peace, which is most of the social leaders that are land rights activists, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, environmental activists, union leaders, people who are trying to get the accord implemented. Because they don't have the full political backing of the government saying that this is a priority and this needs to be implemented, they are basically vulnerable to being killed and hurt by the illegal armed groups operating in these territories.

Chappell: Violence has ensued as new armed factions have taken advantage of the power vacuum left behind by a demobilized FARC and a retreating Colombian government.

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Palacios: Today, the violence is worse than in the days prior to the massacre on May 2nd. In Bojayá, we've been lucky that we haven't had worse massacres. Today, there are 7,000 people out of 11,000 residents that have been on lockdown from armed groups for two years. We are repeating the story of 2002 in the sense that we've told the government that our communities are unprotected, and the government has not responded. But today, it's more serious, because two years ago the government's own Ombudsman has reported on the risk facing these 7,000 people, 7,000 residents of Bojayá, or the governments haven't taken the appropriate measures to get the people out of that conflict.

Chappell: Leyner tells of a massive paramilitary incursion into Bojayá around New Year's Day, 2020, that scared the community given its history with paramilitaries. Leyner helped denounce the incursion, questioning how such an incursion was possible given the presence of Colombia's military forces in the region.

He immediately received credible threats to his life via WhatsApp, but he also received an invitation from Colombia President Iván Duque, for a meeting. In preparation for the meeting, Leyner organized social and community leaders in his region to compile a heavily-sourced document that outlined the present dangers to ethnic communities in Chocó.

- Palacios: The president committed himself to get personally involved in the handling of the situation, and then a few days later, he traveled to Bojayá. While there, he committed himself to respond to the document we had shared with him concerning the characteristics of the problems we were facing. To this day, the president has not only not responded, but I'm telling you that the situation in Bojayá has gotten much worse.
- Chappell: Leyner's personal situation got worse, as well. In March 2020, his government-provided bodyguard was killed in an assassination attempt. As of today, he has in Bojayá, the community that he has worked decades to protect.
- Palacios: What's my gut instinct? That they're profiling me, as they say. That they're going to kill me, run me over, as soon as I go over there. I mean, the consequences of defending human rights on the Pacific Coast and above all, in our context, in these territories, is truly, really difficult. Because when you defend human rights, the first enemy you find and the first obstacle you encounter, we encounter it in the institutions that should be your ally in the defense of human rights. No. The Colombian state and the representatives of that state come out against our work, and that's what's happening with my particular case. But it's happening to a lot of leaders.
- Chappell: So, why is peace falling apart in Bojayá? Why is Leyner, who is working to build that peace, under threat to his life? Why has the government failed to implement key parts of the peace deal? Some of it has to do with drug trafficking. Colombia is one of the largest producers of cocaine in the world. Some of it has to do with a lack of rights.
- Palacios: I think there is still violence for many reasons. The first is that in Colombia, there is racial discrimination. And this racial discrimination is so strong that it permits the consolidation of war in ethnic communities: Afro and Indigenous communities. I can assure you, if this violence that's developing in Bojayá, if it wasn't for discrimination, if it was happening somewhere else, it would have been solved already.
- Chappell: Leyner insists that if major cities like Bogotá or Medellín experienced this level of ongoing violence, that something would be done about it.
- Palacios: I have my first theory. It's that in these communities, and especially on the Pacific Coast, live Indigenous and Afro-descendants. The other element is that in these communities, there are natural resources, right? And we, unfortunately, are located in the territories that are coveted for development. The other problem we have is that the Colombian state has forgotten us and has sunk ethnic communities. We are talking about a lack of implementation on health, education, and housing.
- Chappell: Late last year, Leyner was named to Colombia's Truth Commission, the entity tasked with establishing the official account of what happened during the five-decade-long conflict. It's an indispensable effort for finding truth, reaching reconciliation, and ensuring accountability for millions of Colombian families.
- Palacios: In the Bojayá massacre, we lost 48 young people. That's like coming into a town and killing off hope. So, my great hope is to see a reconciled Colombia. My great hope is that in this Pacific Coast, we have health, education, and that we provide opportunity. I grew up in a zone where we didn't have a ball, a soccer ball. To play, we would wrap up balls of rice. And if you got to my town, Pogue, you'll find the pitch with the same holes and without a ball. 44 years later, without a soccer ball. That's the reality that many generations face in Colombia's Pacific Coast. They need us to bring opportunity. They need us to bring

recreation. They need us to bring health. They need us to bring interconnectivity. So, I dream of a different Colombia, an egalitarian Colombia.

Chappell: For Leyner, achieving that vision requires advocacy that ensures the full implementation of the peace accord. But in the face of a Colombian government that he believes is undermining any opportunity to build peace, Leyner has a message for the international community, and specifically a U.S. Congress that was a champion for peace in Colombia in the past.

Palacios: I think the United States Congress should be conscious of what's happening. I would like them to know my story, because when someone knows the story of what's happening to people, that's when they realize it's time to do something different. I think U.S. members of Congress don't realize or can't comprehend what's actually happening in Colombia. I think the ethnic movement needs backing, support, accompaniment. In Colombia, the people whose rights are being violated are largely Afro-descendent and Indigenous populations, and we need solidarity, including the rights of women. As I said, with this war, with the pandemic, being an Afro-descendant or Indigenous woman is very complicated, and it's very important that Congress realizes the different impacts of war on our territories.

If I could ask anything from the United States Congress, that I know they won't do, it would gain an understanding of the need for peace and ask the Colombian government to retake the path to peace. Our government is killing us with the decisions they take. There are many ways to kill us here, with bullets for instance, but the decisions that are being taken are also killing people here.

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