



## Erlendy Cuero Bravo: A Vision for Community

Five decades of conflict displaced millions of Colombians from their homes, disproportionately impacting Afro-descendant and Indigenous Colombians. Many arrived in the city of Cali, including Erlendy Cuero Bravo. This episode explores the work Erlendy has done to bring attention to government neglect of displaced communities in Cali, especially in neighborhoods like Llano Verde where Afro-Colombians are concentrated, and where the murder of five boys in August 2020 sparked outrage..

Darryl Chappell:

Hello, my name is 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.

A massacre, according to Colombian NGO Indepaz, is the “intentional collective homicide of three or more people protected by international human rights law, and who are not able to defend themselves.” Massacres were prevalent during the Colombian conflict and they have become prevalent once again. Indepaz counted more than 70 massacres in Colombia in 2020, the highest number since the signing of the 2016 peace accord.

So, why have massacres returned to Colombia and what does it say about how peace implementation is unfolding in the country? At a macro level, the answer is clear according to Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, the Director for the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America.

Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli:

Massacres are taking place because the illegal armed groups and the people financing them are basically not being given the message that there will be any consequences for doing such killings. So, this is a failure of the peace accord not being implemented because a big part of the accord was to try to figure out how you dismantle these illegal armed groups. Not just the FARC guerillas – that’s one illegal group – but also these other structures.

Chappell:

But to better understand why massacres in Colombia are at their highest point since the peace accord, we need to better understand the dynamics on the ground in the communities that have been the targets of massacres in the past year. And for that, we will turn to August of last year, where seven massacres rocked the country in the span of two weeks.

The first of those happened in Llano Verde, an Afro-Colombian enclave in the outskirts of Cali, where the majority of the population are displaced individuals, people who fled their homes and ancestral lands during the worst of the conflict. On August 12<sup>th</sup>, five boys – Luis

Fernando Montaña, Josmar Jean Paul Cruz Perlaza, Álvaro Jose Caicedo Silva, Jair Andrés Cortes Castro, and Leider Cárdenas Hurtado – left their homes to fly a kite in the morning, only to turn up tortured and dead later that night. Erlendy Cuero Bravo, a local social leader working to stitch together peace in her community, and herself someone who was displaced to Llano Verde by the conflict, was among the first to respond to the horrific tragedy.

Cali Vlogger: Good evening to the media, what is your name?

Erlendy Cuero Bravo:

Erlendy Cuero Bravo.

Cali Vlogger: Erlendy, you're a leader in this community?

Cuero Bravo: Yes. Of this community and the Afro-Colombian community of armed conflict victims.

Cali Vlogger: Do you have any identification of the boys in question?

Cuero Bravo: There are five minors, one of which I know. It's possible I know the others. It's just so sad that they've lost their lives, especially in the way they did.

Cali Vlogger: Behind you, there's a lagoon?

Cuero Bravo: Yes. It's a lagoon where kids come to swim. They leave their houses to have fun. This whole quarantine, the pandemic, these circumstances that families are in here in Llano Verde, 80 percent of families are victims of armed conflict. So, their economic situations don't allow for other recreation, so kids come here. But what anyone least expected is that these boys would be murdered this way, tortured... This is the level of injustice that we experience in Colombia. Because no one expected this, to murder children that way. There's just justifying this crime.

Chappell: This is not the first massacre that's ever happened in Llano Verde, but Erlendy calls it one of the most difficult that the residents of Llano Verde have ever lived through. Erlendy will take us to her community to tell us why that is.

Cuero Bravo: Llano Verde has two sides: heaven and hell. It is heaven because people are very supportive and very united. As there are many Afro-descendant communities, the house is always open. They welcome you. There's a smile in the midst of all their difficulties. We have our ancestral links, ancestral knowledge, and it's like being with family. So, people who go to live in Llano Verde stay, because the people are very loving, very supportive.

[News Clip]

Cuero Bravo: However, it is hell because it's like a time bomb. We don't know when something unthinkable is going to happen, like the killing of children or massacres. There's the issue of gang recruitment, the issue of drug trafficking.

Chappell: Llano Verde is in the outskirts of Cali, which is sometimes called the "post-conflict capital" of Colombia. That's because for decades it has been the primary destination for hundreds of thousands of Afro-Colombians fleeing massacres, murders, kidnappings, and human rights abuses committed on the Pacific Coast during the Colombian conflict. The local government estimates that more than 200,000 people living in Cali today were victims of

the conflict. Like Erlendy, many of these people fled violence in coastal communities and cities like Buenaventura.

Cuero Bravo: I think my dad died being a leader without realizing it, which is the most incredible thing. We left the place where he was born, where I was born, and we went to an urban-rural zone in Buenaventura. And there, my dad took charge. We were the third family to arrive in the neighborhood and we were helping collect water because there was no water. Helping so that electricity would be provided. There was no electricity in that sector. No streets. The neighborhood was more like a little jungle, an open field. And from the moment we arrived to live there, my dad dedicated himself fully to that place, to managing it. And my dad dedicated himself economically to being a supplier of peach palm, a merchant. And that's where his biggest problems arose, because at that moment in time paramilitarism was building in Buenaventura.

Chappell: Erlendy believes her father was murdered because he refused to cooperate with the paramilitary groups forming in Buenaventura. The death of her father would change her life in many ways. It would eventually inspire her to become a leader herself. But in the immediate aftermath, it led her first displacement to Cali.

Cuero Bravo: First, because of the emotional impact of my father's death, I'd been sent to live in Cali. And I said I didn't want to live in Cali because I didn't like the city, especially the part where I was sent to. I didn't want to.

Chappell: Erlendy returned to Buenaventura after a brief spell in Cali. She was sent back a few years later, but then came home again. At the age of 22, this time of her own accord, she decided to flee Buenaventura for good after her cousin was murdered.

Cuero Bravo: And the way they killed him; the military killed him with guns. They made him kneel. They shot him 12 times. At that moment, he was the person I was closest to, so when they killed him that way, it was time to leave or else.

Chappell: This happened during the year 2000, which was the beginning of a brutal period of violence in Buenaventura. Erlendy was not the only person to flee Buenaventura and arrive in Cali at that moment. Around the same time that she arrived in the outskirts of Cali, a massive displacement was underway from certain sections of Buenaventura where there had been numerous massacres. For all these displaced individuals, their arrival in a new community raised new worries and concerns, but Erlendy noted how little she felt had changed.

Cuero Bravo: And it's what am I going to face? What job will I do? Where will I live? Because those of us who come from the Pacific, especially Black or Indigenous communities, have our own ways, our own homes, our own environment, and arriving in a place where you don't have a home to then pay rent, with what money? But when we arrived in Aguablanca in Cali, you realize that the conditions don't change. It's the same situation, but more complex because here we saw psychoactive substances in every corner; young people stealing, stabbing. We came from a world of conflict and we said, "My God, what is going on? Where are we? What have we done?" Was it better to change one territory thinking we were going to protect our lives, but arrive at a territory facing the same situations, or similar situations, but with different territorial contexts?

Chappell: Erlendy soon realized that the only way to answer those questions was to follow in the footsteps of her father by becoming a leader in this quickly forming community.

Shortly after arriving in Cali, Erlendy started working at a local organization that sought to advocate for services for recently displaced individuals. Within a year, she was asked to welcome a new wave of displaced people. They were from her former community in Buenaventura, and they were fleeing two recent massacres.

Cuero Bravo: And when I had to welcome the first family, I went and sat with them on the stairs to cry because I did not know what to say to them. So, we were crying, and I didn't know if I should console the woman I was talking to, because she was hugging me, and I was just crying and crying. And then I told myself, "I can't cry. I have to give her strength. If they see me crying, they will wind up even more devastated."

Chappell: But beyond projecting strength, Erlendy also had to help the newly displaced understand the circumstances that led them to flee. When she would gather with others who had been displaced, she realized...

Cuero Bravo: We didn't understand what was happening at all. We didn't understand the reason for the conflict. We were being sold the story that we had to leave our territories because of a conflict between guerillas and paramilitaries. We weren't able to understand the richness of our territories, and that said richness was the reason for kicking the Black or Afro-descendant communities out of their territory.

Chappell: Erlendy wanted to help her community move beyond the conversations happening in these types of gatherings. She wanted to help move towards action. While working for her local organization, she received an opportunity to lead a project called "Fruta Paz," which supported the Afro-Colombian women in Cali who sold peach palm – coincidentally, the very same fruit her father had produced in Buenaventura.

Cuero Bravo: We were able to work on a project that I was able to lead as a woman, and it was about dignifying the work of the Black women who sold peach palm and tropical fruits. Here in Cali, they were allowed to sell on the sidewalks, but in such horrible conditions, and we started working on the idea that they needed to be treated differently, that they could not live that way. That they were icons of the city. That Cali was known for its peach palm.

Chappell: Erlendy managed to deliver her message to the governor at a public meeting with hundreds of people present. In doing so, she secured significant victories for the women she was fighting for. Improvements for housing, funds to support their work. This was the first time Erlendy felt like a leader in her community. At the moment, she remembered her dad.

Cuero Bravo: So, at that moment, I felt like I could do things, like I could accomplish things. No matter what had happened in my life before that, I could create change. And the only thing I had in my mind was that my dad, wherever he was, would be proud of me because he taught me these lessons. He gave me the path. And I will continue to do things that make him proud, because I can still hear his voice. When I was little, I would go with him to the farm and on the journey he would teach me lessons. "My daughter, you need to do this. You need to study. You need to." And even after they killed him, I would walk that same path to the farm to pick up peach palms, so I've always had that in my mind, the responsibility to do something. So, I felt in that moment that I was honoring his memory, working on good change for him.

Chappell: Her increasing role as a leader opened many doors for her, including an advocacy trip to Bogotá to advocate for a constitutional measure to protect the rights of displaced

Afro-Colombian women. On that trip, she met with staff from AFRODES, an organization that defends the human rights of Afro-Colombians and victims of the conflict. That meeting opened her eyes to a new form of advocacy, one not just focused on providing help for individuals, but tackling the systemic issues facing displaced Afro-Colombians in Cali.

Cuero Bravo: So, when I returned from Bogotá, I talked with a group of women and I told them, “I am leaving Fruta Paz, and I want to create an organization where we can work on the issues we want to. But it should be work not for the individual benefit, but work that thinks about the collective, that fights for our sons and daughters.”

Chappell: The organization Erlendy founded with these women in 2008 was called Camino Propuesto. And it immediately began pushing for spaces in the Cali government to include the voice of displaced families. But they faced resistance from city officials.

Cuero Bravo: There was a mayor in Cali that told us he was going to put stone mattresses in the city so that displaced people didn't stay too long here. Things like that. The ethnic and race issues weren't respected here at all. They said that all displaced people were the same and therefore we had to be treated equally.

Chappell: At that time, the municipal government had formed a technical committee to talk about challenges facing displaced communities. However, they had only invited delegates from displaced communities that were friendly to them. Erlendy invited herself into the meetings, believing that Afro-Colombian displaced families needed a voice in the room of decision makers.

Cuero Bravo: And so, they started talking, and I was made completely invisible in that meeting. They were organizing approvals for plans, projects, and programs pertaining to the rights of the displaced population. So, I raised my hand and they told me I wasn't authorized to speak, so I stood up anyway and spoke. I said, “So, I'm not invited here, I'm not authorized to speak here, but someone has to speak up, because we are Black communities in crisis in this city and you do not recognize us. You do not work with us. You mock us.” Well, I told them everything I thought, and fearing that I would continue making a scene, they decided to invite me to all the following committee meetings.

Chappell: In these meetings, Erlendy began to see how little of the money promised to displaced communities was actually being implemented and delivered.

Cuero Bravo: When we normally participate in those committees with city officials, many of them are preceded by the mayor talking about a budget, a budget like, “We've approved 9,000 million Colombian pesos, or 17,000 million, or 14,000 million.” But when we come back to reality, that money, well, very little of it reaches the community.

Chappell: Erlendy would soon get an even closer look at the inefficiencies and corruption in the delivery of basic and guaranteed rights to Afro-Colombian displaced populations. In 2013 and 2014, the government of Cali joined forces with the Colombian national government to build a neighborhood in the district of Aguablanca. 4,319 houses were built and were given via lottery to displaced individuals, among others.

[News Clips]

Chappell: The new neighborhood was called Llano Verde and it was billed as a model for reconciliation and a promise of a better life, with adequate housing for displaced individuals and others. Erlendy was one of the people who had won the lottery for a house

in Llano Verde. It came at an important time in her life – Erlendy had been receiving threats for her work. She was looking for a change and a break from being a social leader.

Cuero Bravo: Once again, I found community. And then, some of the people from my prior neighborhood that had also moved to Llano Verde started coming to me saying, “You are the law, and you were a leader, right?”

Chappell: The needs of the community and the lack of state attention to Llano Verde brought Erlendy back to the work of a social leader.

Cuero Bravo: There wasn’t a school in that sector. There wasn’t a childcare facility. We didn’t have transportation. We had to walk a kilometer just to take transportation. And the government was happily promoting its free housing, their programs. But those of us who were there had no support for anything. So, we started to organize, to petition. By 2015, we had written the Constitutional Court to review the housing programs. I started to organize people. 200 families doing this, doing that. And it became complicated, because I started to receive threats. There were text messages, they were pamphlets. We will kill you. That was when they tried to kill me Llano Verde.

Chappell: Two men with handguns attempted to enter Erlendy’s house but were unable to before help arrived. Erlendy fled the neighborhood for some time out of concern for her safety, but then returned. Upon returning, she received a pamphlet with a threat against the life of her son. A threat that later turned into a failed attempt to assassinate him.

Erlendy decided to leave Llano Verde for good, but rather than abandon her house, she set it up to help others.

Cuero Bravo: And there we decided that until today, the house remains open as AFRODES Cali.

Chappell: To this day, AFRODES Cali serves as a cultural house, a center for oversight into municipal assistance for displaced families, and a provider of community services the government is failing to provide the residents in Llano Verde. In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the last line of defense the residents of this forgotten community have.

Cuero Bravo: Our communities don’t have food. That’s not a story of the pandemic. It’s simply a situation that I’ve seen in my 20 years working on this, permanently facing this. But this is welfare, and we don’t want to perpetuate it. We want to build the conditions in which our people can provide their own food, that our communities be educated and prepared. But there’s no academic preparation that allows them to get a good job in good conditions. We have a set of really difficult situations in our community at the moment, but it’s due to the history here, that trajectory of state abandonment. This is simply what the pandemic is reflecting.

Chappell: Llano Verde, whose population all experienced the worst of the Colombian conflict, and who today are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, massacres, and a lack of basic needs, was one of the communities who most steadfastly stood in support of the 2016 peace accord because of the promises it made.

Cuero Bravo: The first personal reaction was that many people will want to go back to their territories. Our elders that want to go and cultivate, that want to go back to their fields, can do it. So, at first it was happiness, because I know that people are living through difficult circumstances in life, in relating to each other, in getting used to this, so we were satisfied at first. And second, the other satisfaction I felt was that we would no longer have more dead young kids.

- Chappell: That hope drove Erlendy and her organization, AFRODES, to build enormous support for the peace accord among Afro-Colombian communities, despite efforts by the opposition to polarize the accord itself.
- Cuero Bravo: When we started that whole process with AFRODES to share the information, we started convening our communities to understand the peace accord.
- Chappell: But today, as the prospect of peace feels further than at any point in the last five years, Erlendy worries about her community.
- Cuero Bravo: After we managed to help the community understand, well, then people wanted peace. They wanted to work for peace because it was important. And now we are disillusioned, and one feels that it was simply a waste, that we didn't meet the goal, because the people of Llano Verde, with whom we talked about peace, and about their kids, they're saying, "Look, there is your peace. And that peace that we had dreamed about, having our kids like this?"
- Chappell: But it's more than just disillusion. Erlendy believes that her work for peace in Llano Verde is directly tied to efforts to polarize the peace, which then led to the onset of massacres in the last year.
- Cuero Bravo: It's all related, because we are living once again those things that we thought we had left behind in the past, those things that the peace accord was supposed to end, the war in which our youth and other victims are losing their lives. But I also think it's a reprisal, that it's shredding the peace accord. So, one feels that because of what happened in Llano Verde, which wasn't the first massacre, but it was one of the most difficult we have lived in that sector, because as Black communities, we largely said yes to the peace accord in our territories because we lived the consequences of the conflict. And it seems that because of that, they're making us pay for having supported peace.
- Chappell: In addition to the disillusion, even understanding that the massacres might be a backlash from right-wing paramilitaries against those brave voices calling for peaceful communities, Erlendy thinks there's a stronger voice at play that's resulting in massacres.
- Cuero Bravo: Another way of killing a community is making invisible its issues. When a state abandons a community, when it doesn't care what happens in a community even though it's calling for help because its youth are getting killed. So, when we have a government that's telling us that it doesn't care, that turns its back on us, that makes our whole situation invisible. That's another form of massacring our communities.
- Chappell: And according to Erlendy, that lack of attention by the current government to the issues of Llano Verde and the lack of peace implementation was shown fully when President Ivan Duque came to Llano Verde after the massacre to pay his respects.
- Cuero Bravo: First, I can say this visit was very negative. I have nothing positive to say about the visit because remember when I said there are reprisals against our organization, but also how they make us invisible? Because despite the fact that we've led efforts to denounce issues in Llano Verde, and we've taken them to all the relevant scenarios, they did not let us go to the president's visit because they weren't interested in listening to us.
- Chappell: It is in these conditions – a community built by the state, but forgotten by it, where there's no food, no opportunity beyond drugs and crime – that five boys were brutally tortured and murdered last year. Their story mirrors the stories of dozens of Afro-Colombian

communities in Colombia terrorized by violence and completely forgotten by the state, despite the commitments it has made in the peace accord to protect displaced families and work to support ethnic and rural communities. Even facing these enormous challenges, Erlendy still believes and fights for peace.

Cuero Bravo: Though I've always said that AFRODES is an ethnic organization of Black or Afro-descendant communities, at our AFRODES location we welcome Indigenous. We welcome mestizos. We gather there as people. We don't care about skin color. We don't care if it's a man or a woman. What we care about is being able to gather as a community, to serve, to help. In that way, the building of peace becomes territorial, and I think that's the way to do it.

I also have a space where I simply listen to people, because people want more than just money or food. When you've lived through conflict, people want to be heard. They want to vent. They want to be able to transmit and tell: "This happened to me. I'm living with this. I feel pain because of this." Simply listening sometimes provides comfort. People can lessen their load. So, all these processes that we undertake are ones that Colombia needs to prepare to undertake, because we are all psychologically and socially affected by everything that we've lived.

Chappell: Helping that process move along is the work of a social leader according to Erlendy. It's finding a way to bring the peace accord into the community, despite attempts to weaken it by the current Colombian government.

Cuero Bravo: Our peace cannot stay on a signed piece of paper in the Colón Theater with the Santos government. It's clear this government with Uribe tendencies doesn't want peace. We can't leave the peace like that. Our peace has to transcend into the construction of territorial peace with thousands of leaders like us building. I often say, "There are people working silently to build peace. You will find them stitching it together in the community." That's the work we do. That's where you'll see the building of peace. That's where we differentiate ourselves.

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