



Danelly Estupiñán: A Vision for Equality

Buenaventura, a Pacific port city in Colombia, is coveted by economic and criminal interests. The people of Buenaventura have been caught in the middle of brutal battles to control their homes and the land they live on. Danelly Estupiñán, an Afro-Colombian social leader, is part of the effort to give power back to the people and pave a new path for peace.

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.

According to Colombian government data, nearly 400,000 people live in or around Buenaventura, and more than 85% are Afro-Colombian. Buenaventura also happens to be one of Colombia's and the world's most important commercial seaports, according to Gimena Sánchez, the Director for the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America.

Gimena Sánchez:

Basically, Buenaventura was and is the number one port of Colombia in terms of 60% imports and exports, the number one for the Pacific, and the number one for the United States.

Chappell: Yet despite its economic value, Buenaventura is still part of the "other" Colombia.

Sánchez: So, one of the biggest contradictions about Buenaventura is it is a country's most important port. It brings in a tremendous amount of revenue for the rest of the country. But the people living there, the majority of the inhabitants don't have potable water, don't have sufficient sanitation. Many of them are living on top of raw sewage and garbage.

Chappell: Buenaventura is home to a rapidly expanding seaport, a city where reckless development collides with drug trafficking, racism, and patriarchy, leaving behind a community with little option but to resist. It is also home to a social leader who has spent her life organizing her community to resist against these very forces, Danelly.

Danelly Estupiñán:

My daily purpose is to have the strength to keep resisting, as hard as it may seem. Those of us who are involved in the dynamics of defense of human rights in Colombia, in Latin America, we understand. We know that we're changing a structure, a power structure built on many powers, to put it one way. On economic power through the development of capital, on capitalism, patriarchy, racism.

Chappell: That was Danelly Estupiñán, an Afro-Colombian leader, welcoming you to Buenaventura. The power structures that Danelly actively resists are the same ones that have played out in Buenaventura over the decades. Buenaventura was coveted during the Colombian conflict by guerrilla groups and paramilitaries interested in its strategic location that facilitated the drug trade. It is prized again today by powerful economic and criminal interests. All along, the people of Buenaventura have been caught in the middle of brutal battles to control the land they live on.

In the late 1980s, Buenaventura was the site of violence tied to the Colombian conflict. A combination of strategic access to the sea, a wealth of natural resources, and coca-producing fields in rural areas drew the interest of guerrillas on the one end, and right-wing paramilitaries who at times colluded with the Colombian military on the other. Both were actively looking for resources to finance their ongoing battles.

But it wasn't until 2000, just around the time that a young Danelly immersed herself in grassroots activism with the Black Communities' Process (PCN) that violence in the city intensified to previously unimaginable levels.

Estupiñán: There were situations that I did not understand, did not comprehend. Really difficult, painful situations. Violence, bombings, displacements, forced disappearances, massacres. We documented so many instances of violence on that team, and I was distressed because I didn't quite understand what was happening.

Chappell: In 1990, 58 homicides were recorded in Buenaventura. In 2000, there were over 400. Of the 26 massacres reported by the National Center of Historical Memory, a government entity tasked with uncovering and clarifying the causes of human rights abuses committed during the conflict, in Buenaventura, between 1995 and 2013, 20 happened in the four years between 2000 and 2004. In Buenaventura, people call this period the "Epoch of 1,000 deaths." Aggressive paramilitary incursions into the city drove a surge of violence.

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Sánchez: And what became particularly horrible about this situation is that the groups started upping each other in terms of terror, and so it became a complete display of barbarism. You know, cutting people into pieces, torturing people for hours on end in front of everybody else, raping and attacking and torturing women who were thought to even speak to a member of the other group or enemy, so to speak.

Chappell: Though at the time Danelly didn't quite get the reasons for the increasing violence and brutality, she was compelled to understand and meet the needs of her Afro-Colombian community.

Estupiñán: We produced human rights reports on what was really happening in Buenaventura. We organized social mobilizations that unveiled the massacres or the ethnocide, as we called it at the time, in Buenaventura. And I began to be recognized within my organization, but also with the people of Buenaventura, with the people who I accompanied. After that documentation process in the mid-2000s, we began to provide psychosocial attention for those who had lived through violence, because there were severe traumas, prolonged pain.

- Chappell: The intensity of the trauma and the pain pushed Danelly to find new ways to support her community. Specifically, she felt compelled to provide spaces for mothers mourning the loss of sons and daughters to the conflict.
- Estupiñán: Keeping in mind that the situation was creating serious emotional damage among the mothers, we began to organize what we called “collective wakes” and “collective last nights.” We made a tomb which we pretended held the body of the deceased. We prepared a beautiful space in the house, with flowers, with pictures of all the people. Usually, when we have the body and the coffin, we pray and sing all night. But since we didn’t have the bodies, we used their photos, and we did the ritual as if the body were there. It was my idea, and that idea was – to say it this way – very emotionally resonant. The mothers cried, prayed, and sang. And the next day, hearing their stories, that they felt they had been able to say goodbye to their sons and daughters told us, told me concretely, we’re doing well. This is the way to help.
- Chappell: This was emotionally taxing work, but Danelly soldiered on for years, through massacres, disappearances, murders, kidnappings, and more. The emotional burden eventually forced her to focus on a different project, one that led her to develop a hypothesis to explain the root of the surge in violence in her community and a new way of organizing for peace.
- In 2004, Danelly got the chance to take a course with an expert on geopolitics and economics. What he shared with her inspired more than a decade of work.
- Estupiñán: He told us, “First comes the violence, and then the ports will arrive.”
- Chappell: This stuck with Danelly. She started seeing the news of new port construction and remembered her teacher’s words. She began to do research – on the internet, in the field talking with communities. She developed a theory that helped her understand why violence in Buenaventura had exploded since 2000.
- Estupiñán: Up until 2012, everyone said that the big problem in Buenaventura was the problem of drugs and drug trafficking. That we had issues because we were a transit point for drugs and that everything that happened here was generated by the illegal business of drug trafficking.
- Chappell: But this explanation struck Danelly as only partially true. While it could explain some of the violence, it didn’t explain the sudden spike in paramilitary activity in 2000 and the resulting increase in brutal violence. It didn’t explain the fact that she had spent years setting up collective wakes for dozens of families who had lost sons and daughters in the first part of the 2000s. She focused her analysis on the port, specifically Afro-Colombian communities that were right on the water.
- Estupiñán: So, I began to see that there was a correlation between those projects of port expansion that were being projected from my city and the places where the violence was happening in its greatest intensity and brutality.
- Chappell: Specifically, the violence was surging in land known as “territories taken from the sea,” segments of land right on the coast that were filled in by hand by the ancestors of Afro-Colombian communities in Buenaventura.
- Estupiñán: They made handmade fillings using organic and inorganic garbage and consolidated them into the mainland. They filled it out and turned it into land thinking about their future, their own life project. And turns out that later, after we built those neighborhoods, we

strengthened that territory. We gave life to that territory and now it's a coveted territory because of the port's expansion.

Chappell: Companies in Buenaventura identified this region as ideal as ports were installed in Buenaventura. These companies wished to use the land to build warehouses for shipping containers. They needed parking spaces for truck tractors to transport goods. They needed hotels that would house those drivers as well as the entrepreneurs looking to invest in the trade economy. The area built by Afro-Colombians was incredibly valuable.

Estupiñán: So, it turns out that we were able to analyze that the war was concentrated there, with the interest of demographically emptying out these territories, regentrifying them, to use that term. The aim was to use violence to create that panic, that terror, that fear to motivate massive displacement, and through that, install those new economic dynamics in those territories. That was one of the strategies that was being used that no one knew, no one analyzed.

Chappell: Danelly researched this issue extensively and published a paper on it called "Victims of Development." Through it, she used different instances of violence and trends to argue that it wasn't just the illegal drug trafficking that was leading to violence in Buenaventura. The legal economy was generating significant damage and violence to Afro-Colombian communities in the city.

Estupiñán: So, keeping that in mind, it was clear that we weren't victims of violence, rather that a specific vision of economic development was provoking port violence. And that these armed groups, well, they were doing the bidding, the work given to them by port entrepreneurs and the legal economy of the ports.

Chappell: Her research went even further by naming a new actor that was participating in the nascent and brutal violence in the port city.

Estupiñán: The real faces of the violence are the businessmen that pay the paramilitaries, the armed groups, to massacre and kill. And they benefit from those massacres because they create displacement. And after that displacement, they can then install their economic model. They go and build parking lots, they go and build containment centers, they go and build hotels. So, this thesis was very powerful because it managed to interpret the analysis of what was happening in Buenaventura in a different manner. It showed the structural issues of the analysis and it included an actor that had been untouchable up until then, a face for the violence that had been untouchable and unnamed to that moment.

Chappell: Danelly's thesis kicked off a flurry of investigations. She teamed up with the National Center for History Memory to work on a book about Buenaventura. She also worked on a separate case study which outlined the history of port expansion and the damage and violence it brought to a specific territory taken from the sea, a neighborhood known as The Immaculate.

Estupiñán: At the start of the year 2000, this was the neighborhood. This was the laboratory for the violence in Buenaventura. It became a ghost neighborhood. Nobody wanted to look that way. Nobody wanted to see what was going on in there. Anyone who went inside who was not from the neighborhood would go missing. The entire neighborhood became a torture house, a collective torture house. And we had all sorts of testimonials. All types of violence were being experienced here, including myself as a citizen of Buenaventura. Nobody wanted to look into that neighborhood. Nobody wanted to see.

- Chappell: What nobody wanted to see was that this neighborhood was a part of the port expansion plans that were included in big ticket free trade agreements.
- Sánchez: A lot of the areas where you would need to expand the port in order to be able to have the level of operations that you need for all of the free trade agreement signs, all of this increased commerce, were occupied by people.
- Chappell: Danelly found compelling evidence made public by the Justice and Peace Act, a 2005 law intended to demobilize paramilitary groups and bring truth to people who were victimized by them, that backed up her theory: paramilitaries were doing the work of private interests in Buenaventura.
- Estupiñán: So, they mentioned in their testimonials that the Cauca Valley entrepreneurs had called them to Buenaventura, and that the massacres they had done in Buenaventura were related to the call to action done by the entrepreneurs.
- Chappell: Danelly's research was revolutionary. She began making inroads with human rights advocates abroad who were interested in her work, but she also caught the attention of others. Almost immediately after she published the last of her investigations in 2015, she received her first death threat.
- Estupiñán: At that point, I was a lecturer at Universidad del Pacífico, and I was inside the car when I received a text message. It said, "DANELLY, your end has come." I received it through a code, not a number. It was a code. So, I thought, "What is this?"
- Chappell: Danelly sent a screenshot of the threat to a United Nations representative. An investigator eventually found that the originator had used the Victim's Unit Database to threaten several leaders around the country. During a call with the UN investigator, Danelly was threatened again.
- Estupiñán: When I got home, I received a call from the UN worker, and she was asking me how I was feeling, how I was doing, and as we were talking, a third distorted voice hijacks the call, which fortunately she was also able to hear. It said, "We know where you are." And they started saying a few horrible things, so I was filled with panic and I threw the phone on the bed. I started packing up everything I could, and I left that night to stay overnight at her house with my daughter.
- Chappell: Danelly eventually was able to receive protection due to the nature of the threats. A human rights group in Barcelona sent a letter on her behalf to the port company, noting that they were aware of Danelly's situation and were monitoring the threats against her. Danelly noted she did not receive any more threats about her research after that.
- Danelly's research and resulting impact on her life was eventually reflected in a key component of the peace accords signed in 2016: the Ethnic Chapter. The Ethnic Chapter at its core recognized that ethnic communities had suffered specific impacts because of the conflict, and their right to territorial peace.
- The Ethnic Chapter was one of the key innovations of Colombia's historic peace accord. The Ethnic Chapter acknowledged that Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities were central to building lasting peace and prosperity. It also recognized that the challenges were rooted in historic, targeted oppression, as well as dispossession of land.

The Ethnic Chapter was included in the accords after tireless advocacy from multiple delegations of ethnic minority representatives. The Ethnic Commission included the National Afro-Colombian Peace Council (CONPA), the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), and the High Government of Indigenous Authorities. They ensured that any peace deal took into account the specific impact of the conflict on Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities.

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- Chappell: It helped move the accord beyond simply ending the bloodshed and towards actionable solutions that tackled the root causes of the conflict. For Danelly, it was a promise that she thought would help validate her work.
- Estupiñán: Within this agreement, which has been signed already, we have a point that deals with Territorial Peace. This is what we called it, Territorial Peace. And it talks about the whole topic of economic dynamics linked to the violence experienced within the territory, which are linked to dispossession of territorial rights. And the first things that we did here were defending, guarding, and protecting the territorial rights of the urban African communities in Buenaventura. And it is our contribution to building that peace.
- Chappell: The Ethnic Chapter, along with the rest of the peace accord, motivated social leaders like Danelly. It gave them new tools with which to do their advocacy. It signaled to them that they had the full support of the international community. But more than anything, it motivated them to mobilize for peace on a bigger scale than ever before.
- Sánchez: Once the accord was signed, the signal to the civil society was, “Wow, we’re in a new era now. We’re not scared. We’re going to go out and ask for what we need in terms of our rights, in terms of our basic needs. The international community is behind us because they’re behind peace.” That gave them all a better sense of protection.
- Chappell: In Buenaventura, this meant that a community that had been downtrodden for so long, that had spent the first part of the 2000s mired in brutality, disappearance, and massive inequality, finally had the tools to resist. And Danelly would play an important role in organizing them.

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- Chappell: In May 2017, the Buenaventura Civil Strike Committee, composed of prominent social leaders in the city, including Danelly, convened hundreds of thousands of Buenaventurans to a peaceful strike that lasted 22 days.
- Sánchez: The civic strike was incredibly important. First of all, it shut down operations of the port completely, meaning everything that came in and out of the port or any business or anything happening, for more than 30 days. It brought together the religious sectors, the teachers, all of the civil society in Buenaventura, under the same rubric of asking for some very basic things from the government. One of them being potable water, a second being there being a fund for Buenaventura. Some of the money leaving coming back, somehow benefiting people, and to find solutions to the employment situation and some of the longstanding structural poverty issues happening there.
- Chappell: The activists encountered heavy backlash as a result of the strike. One of the most prominent leaders of the Strike Committee, Temístocles Machado, was killed. Danelly faced death threats once again. Even the hundreds of thousands of Buenaventurans that

protested faced a repressive government response. Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, WOLA's Director for the Andes, received reports on the ground during the strike.

Sánchez-Garzoli: Immediately they came in and basically attacked the civilian population, even going into people's homes. I believe there were more than a thousand recorded abuses committed by the anti-riot police and security forces that went in.

Chappell: The protests succeeded in getting the Colombian government to the negotiating table to secure key funding to help the citizens of Buenaventura meet basic necessities. And although some of those commitments have not been fully met, there have been other tangible benefits from the strike.

Sánchez-Garzoli: There's still a long way to go to get that fully implemented. It was going in the right direction and then when the Duque administration came into power, that's been stalled a bit. But the infrastructure set up due to the accord of the civic committee led to the first time ever having a mayor in Buenaventura who came from civic society.

Chappell: Danelly has endured even more death threats since her work organizing the strike committee, and some of these have forced her to stop her work building peace in Buenaventura. Yet when she looks back on that 22-day strike, she sees the beginning of a new generation of leadership that will continue her fight for equitable development, justice, and peace in her city.

Estupiñán: I am full of hope. First, because there are a lot of young people, a lot of young people. A lot of people who are convinced. There are a lot of people who know what's happening and an important precedent was set here. For example, they believed they could intimidate us with the assassination of Temístocles Machado. He was one of our comrades in the struggle, in our struggle to defend the land. Instead, they strengthened our resolve, so it's clear that they can assassinate anyone they want here. They can physically exterminate us. But this soul and this motivation for our freedom, for our dignity of life that we deserve, that cannot be assassinated.

Chappell: Danelly believes that now that more people are aware of the underlying problems, the systemic discrimination and exploitation, the people of Buenaventura are prepared to push back.

Estupiñán: The seed is planted. The seed of resistance. And the people know how they deserve to be treated as a people. They know what their collective dreams are. And they are working towards a collective and dignified life project. And here, they can do whatever they want. The people will continue. Those who are left will continue.

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