

dis-place v. to move from its usual or proper place  
dis·place

# Shadow people



The green mountains of Bolivar, north-central Colombia, were Angel Manjares Beliya's place. He and his wife, Enith Leones Monterosa, were born there. They committed their lives to God there. Together with their 10 children, they grew and harvested avocados, corn and yuca.

"We had no money, but we had everything we needed—food, water, and our donkeys, chickens and pigs. Our children were never hungry," Angel remembers.

But the violence convulsing Colombia makes no exceptions for strong families. Angel, who also pastored a small Protestant church, began seeing guerrilla soldiers in his village more than a decade ago. Colombia's rebel forces, divided into several groups with slightly different leftist ideologies and strategies, have been fighting the government since the 1960s. More recently Plan Colombia, a U.S.-supported program aimed at stopping the flow of drugs from Colombia, threatens to increase the violence.

"They [guerrillas] started to pressure people [to join them]. It was uncomfortable," Angel says. "Then the 'paras' started coming about five years ago. With the combat between the two groups—that's when we were affected."

The paras, or paramilitary groups, are newer actors in the armed conflict. These loosely-organized bands are private militias, often in the pay of large landowners, drug traffickers or pow-

erful business interests threatened by the guerrillas. As human rights observers and many Colombians acknowledge, the Colombian military often works with the paras or turns a blind eye to their attacks.

As more paramilitary forces trickled into Angel and Enith's area, terror grew. Threats, suspicion and disappearances were rampant. Then on Jan. 17, 2001, in nearby Chengue village, paramilitary soldiers massacred 34 people.

"They killed people with hammers and cut off limbs. They massacred children and old people and people with disabilities," Angel says.

Terrified villagers and "campesinos," or small farmers, like Angel, began to pour out of the area. Angel and his family were some of the last to go. They got on a bus to Sincelejo, the dusty capital of the nearby state of Sucre, where Enith's sister lives.

On Feb. 11, the family arrived with only what they could carry. Like 2 million other Colombians affected by the violence, they had become "desplazados," the Spanish word for displaced.

Desplazados are Colombia's shadow people. Not technically considered refugees because they remain in their own country, they receive little aid from outsiders or from the Colombian government. In dozens of towns like Sincelejo, they crowd into makeshift shacks or take over abandoned buildings. In Bogotá, Colombia's bustling capital, they ring the city with ever-expanding slums.

Reaching out to the desplazados is dangerous work, and many Colombians ignore their countrymen's desperation. Those who assist displaced people risk being targeted by armed groups.

But those who do take time to hear the stories of the desplazados, to respond to their pleas for justice, are challenged to add their voices to the cry for peace in this troubled country.

On a Tuesday morning in Bogotá, a church committee is reviewing the cases of a dozen desplazados gathered at Teusaquillo Mennonite Church. Most are new arrivals seeking clothing or food.

Some tell their stories in quiet, halting words, while ►

**Terrified villagers and "campesinos" like Angel's family began to pour out of the area.**

Angel Manjares Beliya and his wife, Enith Leones Monterosa, seated, with five of their 10 children. From left, are Adaluz, 12, Hector, 10, Rosa Enith, 4, Tama, 15, and Daniel, 8. The family fled their farm Feb. 11 and are now among Colombia's "desplazados," the Spanish word for displaced.

A pastor, Angel taught himself to read the Bible.





Many displaced people were farmers used to growing their own food. Some, like Luz Enith, pictured left, are now adjusting to new soil and climate conditions. Others face culture and climate shock on Bogotá's chilly streets.

others talk with animated gestures and great detail. Marlen fled with her husband and son, now 9 months old, after paras threatened her husband's life. Oswaldo was driven from his land by guerrillas because he drank coffee with a member of the army. Others say they don't know which group drove them away, only that there were anonymous threats, or massacres in nearby villages, or family members who disappeared.

While Colombia has legislation in place that guarantees assistance to desplazados, nearly all tell a similar story: the government has not helped them, and most city residents ignore them.

The spark of hope in his life, Angel says, comes from his trust in God and his friendship with Maggie Urueta. Urueta's work with Bogotá-based Justapaz, the Colombian Mennonite church peace and justice organization, has blossomed into an outreach program that now includes a conflict mediation program, a school, church services and a farm.

A former lawyer, Urueta is now a Mennonite pastor, organizer and friend to dozens of desplazados.

"Her kindness is worth more than money," Angel says.

Urueta sees Angel as a potential spiritual leader for other desplazados. She also hopes he can be involved on the farm that Justapaz is developing near Sincelejo. The

area around the farm has become "complicated," as Colombians say, meaning increasing violence may prevent it from becoming a self-sustaining place of refuge.

"I would like to work on a farm," Angel says wistfully. "There's no place to grow anything here in the city." Like many desplazados, he pronounces with reverence the names of the crops he used to grow: corn, yuca, beans, mangos, plantains, avocados.

In Bogotá, the struggle is the same.

"They come to the city, they look at the concrete, and they don't know what to do," says Elia de Martinez, a member of the Teusaquillo church committee that assists desplazados.

Working with Mencoldes, the Colombian Mennonite relief and development organization, her congregation sponsors workshops that teach skills such as making snacks and crafts to sell on the street. The workshops, along with weekly Bible studies, are a time for desplazados to share their stories in a safe place.

The church also helps desplazados lobby for their legal rights.

"The only place we've received help is here," says Nelson Saenz, president of a group of 50 displaced families now recognized as a legal entity. "The church has offered

Colombians who assist displaced people risk being targeted by armed groups.



A woman of sorrows: Pastora Cuadrado Quera lives her husband and two sons in Colombia's violence. Behind her is a young son, Everal. John Reyes Cuadrado cares with his nephew, whose father is deceased.



For an intimate look at the lives of two Colombian families affected by displacement, request the Colombia Family Stories photo essay, available soon from MCC.



CLICK HERE [www.mcc.org/gallery](http://www.mcc.org/gallery) To view more of Colombia, visit MCC's photo gallery in November.

us their hand—and this is dangerous.”

While the desplazados find hope in the friendship of people who take risks to help them, the “helpers” have found their lives transformed by their brothers’ and sisters’ struggles.

Maria Ines Palomares, member of the Teusaquillo committee and national coordinator of the Mennonite Church’s work with displaced people, says she has learned from the desplazados what it means to love one’s children or spouse in the midst of violence and suffering.

“Why doesn’t the government acknowledge the family values of the desplazados, the values of solidarity and love?” Palomares asks.

Meanwhile, in the tiny rented house where Angel proudly displays the Bible he taught himself to read and the furniture he carves by hand, the daily struggle continues. One of the older daughters works as a live-in maid, but Angel still has not found a steady job. The family has cut back to two meals a day.

“Scientifically, they call what I have ‘stress,’” Angel says, grinning wryly.

He has tried to return to their old home twice, but both times armed groups refused to let him pass.

“I know my old house is there abandoned,” Enith says. “I cry about this.”

The two are aware of Plan Colombia, the U.S.-backed aid package pouring \$1.3 billion U.S. into the region for counter-narcotics activities. While Plan Colombia activities are not visible in their part of the country—the plan focuses on coca fumigation in the southern state of Putumayo—they realize the implications of the aid package’s focus on military assistance.

“As a pastor, I know the Bible says what you reap you will sow. If you sow arms, you reap war. More war means more hunger and more displacement,” Angel says. ■

*Rachel Beth Miller is an MCC writer.*



Risking their own safety, Mennonites across Colombia care for displaced people. From top, a Mennonite-run school for displaced children in Sincelejo; the Teusaquillo church clothing distribution center in Bogotá. More displaced families pour into Sincelejo and Bogotá every da

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## MCC IN COLOMBIA

Since 1976 MCC has been providing funds and volunteers to assist Colombian Anabaptists’ ministries. These Anabaptist churches and their related institutions are a minority in Colombia, but their Scripture-rooted stand for peace has touched many lives.

The Mennonite Church, with 1,000 members, organizes congregations to aid people displaced by violence. The church’s peace and justice organization, Justapaz, runs a conflict mediation center, raises global awareness of Colombia, assists displaced people and participates in national peace forums. The Mennonite Brethren Church, with 2,000 members, has an Education for Peace conflict resolution pro-

gram. Both denominations support the relief and development agency Mencoldes.

The Brethren in Christ (BIC) church in Colombia has about 100 members. MCC supports Camino de Luz (Way of Light), a BIC-affiliated daycare center in Bogotá.

Justapaz’s Sanctuaries for Peace movement works with all congregations that open their doors to people seeking refuge. Colombian Anabaptists have also struggled against mandatory military service. Other Anabaptist-run institutions include a seminary and a publishing house.

MCC plans to open an office in Colombia soon.