



# GRACE-PILGRIMAGE 2010 IN BOGOTA: HOPE FOR COLOMBIA

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**“Yes,” says Gloria Cuartas, a tireless human rights campaigner in Colombia, former “Mayor of peace” of the north Colombian city of Apartadó, in an interview during the pilgrimage. “I am hopeful that the peace community is being respected, that their rights are being recognized and that there will be justice. I know that it will take a while. I know that it is not easy, but Latin America is moving.”**

From October 31 to November 9 an extraordinary pilgrimage for peace took place in Colombia: About 70 people from the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó walked through Bogotá along with about 60 international peace workers. To the huts of the poorest, to the avenues of the rich and in the palaces of the government, they brought the message: “Peace and community is possible. End violence! Support models for a new Colombia, and a new South America.” It was the first time that the peace community could make clear who they are, in the capital. And beyond this, it was an intense community experience for all who came along and participated: simple peasants and human rights activists from all over Colombia, international peace workers and residents of slums, children, elderly, artists and musicians.

In Colombia, more and more communities and initiatives are arising, who are working on a perspective of hope - in response to the Globalisation war over minerals, drugs and agricultural goods. Among them, the peace community San José de Apartadó is a great carrier of hope. In Urabá (Antioquia) in northern Colombia, on the border to Panama, where the battle between guerrillas, paramilitary and military has been fought rigorously for decades, in 1997, 1500 farmers joined together to build a model of peace. They are decided to resist in a non-violent way, they do not co-operate with any of the armed groups, they endure no weapons and no alcohol in their village. But since its founding, nearly 200 members have been murdered - by the military, paramilitaries and guerrillas. Hardly any of the murders has been solved, on the contrary: government and the press claim that they would cooperate with the guerrillas. Such accusations are a vile means to fight the opposition: They are “set free” to any attack. Nevertheless, the community stays faithful to their principles of nonviolence, renounces vengeance and follows the path of reconciliation: They know that any violence is further fuel to the war. Through this pilgrimage should become clear that San José is not a guerrilla village, but on the

contrary, that it is non-violent model for a peaceful future which arises here. A first direct contact should be made again with the national administration and the international attention should protect them from the constant threat. Also, it should be the beginning of a network connection with other resistance movements in the city.

### *Beginning of the pilgrimage - Contact with the pain of the people*

The pilgrimage starts on 31 October in Facatativá, a town one hour outside of Bogotá. The various groups, including people from the peace research center Tamera in Portugal, internationals who accompany and peace activists, people from San José de Apartadó and representatives of local initiatives meet at a street crossing in the middle of Colombian chaos. Immediately it all starts: Banners are rolled out, music is played, the train is coming in motion. On the other side, armed police and camera people are standing. The inhabitants of the Peace Community have a three day journey by bus behind them, they are completely exhausted and some have no warm clothes, no sleeping bags, didn't take anything with them. For many of them it is the first time outside of the region of Urabá, a hot jungle climate. The organizing team needs to perform one miracle after another, in order to arrange the right clothes, mattresses, sleeping bags, etc.

At the very beginning we are directly confronted with the situation of the country: Father Javier Giraldo takes us to a small slum village called “Virginia de la Roca”. For 40 years, a group lives there in the poorest circumstances, a grandmother with many children and grandchildren, who live from recycling garbage. What a bright childrens' eyes look at one, in the middle of a garbage dump, with wooden shacks as shelter. Under the sheet are a couple of chairs, this is their living room into which we are invited. Surrounded by many children, the grandmother tells her story: In recent years the city has grown more and more, and reached their site. But they, the poor, do not fit into the image of the modern city, and so one wants to get rid of them here. Last spring, one night they were bombed from helicopters, the “village” went up in flames, and two of her grandchildren were killed. The grandmother is deeply moved by the visit of so many people. She says that here in Bogotá, hardly anyone is interested in their fate. “Besides the Diakonia, the Father is the only one who supports us and helps us to survive.”



Father (Padre) Javier Giraldo is a role model for nonviolent resistance for many victims of persecution, both in the cities and in the countryside. Even living under constant life threat, he is a living example for many campesinos, displaced persons and indigenous people, not to follow the way of revenge, but rather to oppose the system of violence by planting new seeds of hope instead. Only in this way, the Father says, can a new world of peace arise. Together with Sabine Lichtenfels, co-founder of the peace center Tamera in Portugal and initiator of the GRACE movement (so far in Israel/Palestine, Portugal and Colombia), he is now leading this year's pilgrimage through Bogotá.

### *An extraordinary group generates attention ...*

We walk through the streets, carrying pictures of the murdered members of the Peace Community, as well as signs, visualizing the core idea: creating models for peace. This is where this GRACE pilgrimage differs from a normal demonstration: we don't come to impose our conviction on the population. Rather, we want to stimulate interest and thereby enable contact. Present is also a group of international musicians from Israel and Brazil, the band "Poesia Samba Soul", which is leading a peace project for youth in the slums of Sao Paulo. They will help during the whole pilgrimage to create a positive energy of communication - even in tense conflict situations.

*Opening ritual at the "Piedras de Tunja", with Padre Javier Giraldo, Sabine Lichtenfels and Meike Müller (translator)*

The people in Bogotá come out of the shops and look out the windows. Something like this they do not know: Who are we? No party? No religion? What are farmers and Internationals doing together? Political banners and samba music? The unusual mixture arouses the interest of the people, and the flyers are read with curiosity. Right at the beginning the pilgrimage is surrounded by armed police officers, who - as they say - want to protect the pilgrimage. But presence of armed forces is not acceptable for the people of the peace community, it is indeed one of its basic principles, not to tolerate any weapons and not to co-operate with any of the conflict parties of the war. At first, the police are friendly, some of them seem so excited about our action that they even brought us some bags of real Colombian coffee the next morning, when we continued the pilgrimage. But later it turned out that the hosts that would accommodate the pilgrimage the next days, were warned by police officers, because in reality we were supposed to be a "group of guerrillas with gringos, who want to occupy the whole city." Here we were facing a real challenge again and again: What does Grace mean? How do we manage to be able to see behind every function that a person holds, to see the person, not to judge, to stay awake and at the same time not to



*Declaration for justice and protection for the Peace Community in front of the Fiscalía General*

open doors to people from the paramilitary or secret service out of political naivety, who want to join us with false friendliness? Practice confidence and yet maintain the utmost vigilance - that is one of the intellectual challenges for each GRACE pilgrimage.

Sabine Lichtenfels and the escorts of PBI (Peace Brigades International) and FOR (Fellowship of Reconciliation) call on the police to respect the wishes of the Peace Community and to let them walk through the city without police escort. It is a small miracle that in the end the claims are respected without hesitation.

### *The right to remember*

Throughout the pilgrimage we carry the photos of the murdered members of the community with us. The "right to remember the deceased," as they call it, is part of the resistance against the system, which includes murder and driving people off their land. When the people of the peace community keep the remembrance of their dead, when they do not tolerate that the murdered victims are forgotten, through this they show that they replace the politics of death by a commitment to life and its value. They show that the work of their deceased leader is living on in the community, despite the violence.

For a long time Father Javier Giraldo is committing himself to justice and the investigation of the

murders, which took place in the Peace Community of San Jose and many other communities of indigenous people and farmers.

Therefore, one aim of the pilgrimage is a walk to the Attorney General. At the entrance we put down photos and 200 carved wooden coffins, each one symbolising a murdered victim, and we express our concerns. Throughout the whole action, the basic attitude of GRACE stays present. It's not about blaming or taking sides for a particular political group or ideology, but to be compassionate and to see our responsibility as human beings again. For is indifference not an essential part, leading to exploitation and oppression worldwide? In this sense, we call on the public prosecutor to reveal the crimes of San José de Apartado and thus send a clear sign of justice and humanity.

The following day a delegation from the peace community together with international companions was received for a conversation in the palace of the Vice President for the first time. The aim is to prepare for renewed negotiations, because since the massacre of 2005, no more talks took place. The aim is that the government officially revoke the slanders against the community and helps to uncover the crimes. The humanitarian, protected

areas should be recognized and the police should leave again from the occupied original village of the community, San José de Apartado.

In both places, and again and again on the pilgrimage, Sabine Lichtenfels expressed publicly our solidarity with the peace community, and emphasizes how deeply we know and appreciate their work, and that we know they do not cooperate with the guerrillas, but work for a non-violent solution with a lot of effort. Sabine Lichtenfels makes clear that all of humanity, if we want to survive, must change dramatically. We all need to learn again to live together in trust and non-violence. She shows that the work that happens in the peace villages, is now urgently needed worldwide: We need new systems for water, food, energy supply - and community. The peace community - and hence Colombia - could be a place where many international peace workers come together for education to establish such peace models. But for this to happen, the peace community urgently needs protection and recognition. Following the pilgrimage a further meeting with the Constitutional Court will take place.

Thus the first step is done: by the direct talks with the government, which was co-responsible for the many crimes itself, through its current policy of impunity, a first "sound barrier" was broken. It is clear that this was only a beginning. The Peace Community doesn't dare to be optimistic yet, because often they have been betrayed by government institutions. But the work on public awareness must continue, the government must feel that this pilgrimage was not a one-time event, but that indeed people around the world are watching the situation of the peace village in Colombia. (See the letter campaign people can join at the end of the text) On this journey each of us feels: From the global connection of peace workers, a new power of hope and solidarity is growing - not only for San José, but for all.

### *The Youth Theatre*

Time and again we have tried to reach the hearts of people. An important contribution was made by the youth of the peace community and the youth group of Tamera. The seven young people from Tamera were already in 2007 - then 11 years old - on their first pilgrimage to Israel-Palestine, after which they, moved by what people can do to each other, wrote a theatre play: "The Black Shadow and the mystery of the Princess". In this way

they wanted to show people what happens in the world, and express their own hope. In the play, the children discover: "We have to change ourselves, then we can change the world! We need to build places where people no longer have to lie, where they can trust each other again and can live together in peace." They show that such places already exist, like in San José de Apartado, and that they want to join forces with them.

To travel to America and to play there in front of many children, was their dream from the beginning. They already went on several tours in Europe, and now they are in South America. For the first time they play in front of 1,500 children - in a school in Bosa, a poorer suburb of Bogota, where we stay several nights. We are constantly surrounded by children, who ask many questions. At a meeting with various organizations from the area a pupil says: "Sometimes I wonder why the adults really do all this. Actually, they should be role models."

The young people from the Peace Community are eager to join the play in the next performances. There is not much time left for rehearsals in between the many walks. So they learn all the texts during a joint bus trip and use every opportunity - in spite of wind and cold - to rehearse together with our young people. When they perform together at the end of the pilgrimage in a theater in Bogotá, there is a spellbound silence. A 16-year-old young woman, whose father was murdered, plays with a clear voice the displaced campesino mother. Boys play child soldiers - armed people they only know from the other side, and whose fate they see now too. Others play the angels, children in a factory, or a news reader. It's amazing how quickly they learned their roles and how engaged they are standing on the stage now. Many spectators are deeply touched by the sincerity and sobriety with which these young people represent the situation in the world. Among the young people themselves, a friendship developed through this joint project, that will continue. A friendship that is based on the common goal to change this world. Such experiences are of great importance for many young people and thus for the future of the community: Because at some point, each young person has to decide whether they want to fully commit themselves to the further development of the peace model, or whether to follow the temptation of an "easier" life in the apparent prosperity of the cities.

## *Ciudad Bolívar - Walking through the slum*

Now we walk through a poor district, which before not too long ago became known in the press through the case of the “Falsos Positivos”: Young men were taken out of the slum with job promises. Shortly after they were found in the north of the country, dead, in guerrilla clothes. In Colombia, there is a reward for each killed guerrillero. This case was discovered, but it is just one of countless cases of systematic cruelty. And the problems of this district, where a million people are living, continue. People appear and disappear. Sabine Lichtenfels: “Would all this be possible, if we had access to the knowledge of real community and solidarity?”

The farmers from the Peace Community and the slum inhabitants of Bogotá have one thing in common: They form two sides of the great problem of Colombia. Five million people were displaced from their land in the last decades. The vast majority of them land in the “barrios” of the big cities. The misery of these people is staggering. Recently they were farmers and could grow themselves what they needed to live - now they send their children to beg and sell plastic toys to tourists. These people have always been poor, but in the city, they have also lost the last: the sense of community, worthiness and togetherness.

The pilgrimage should enable the slum dwellers to see a new perspective. This hope is one reason for the mayor and residents of the “Ciudad” to support the Pilgrimage: “Here in the barrios, no one believes in politicians, we can only become active ourselves - just as the people from the Peace Community did. We will find out how we can help each other. “

## *Not by your own power*

Besides all of us being touched by such a pilgrimage, besides the pain of the world, that is shaking about our own inner inertia, it allows many of us to experience a great power that comes not only from ourselves.

The leading team has to respond to new situations constantly, adapt the program, change routes or find new accommodation for 120 people short-term. There is no time to get excited when something does not work how one wants it. All that can be said is: How can we do the best possible now? This is a lesson which the peace community is teaching us again and again: They mourn over the people who die, and every time, they immediately ask the question: And now what? What is the next step, which leads us further?

Meike Müller, the translator of Sabine Lichtenfels, describes how already on the third day there was a situation, where her own strength was exhausted after an intense day. “But I knew we will go to the Vice President in a moment, where I have to be fully present. Then I said a prayer: Goddess, you brought me here. Take care that I have the necessary strength. And from that point, never again did I come to this point of exhaustion, but was constantly in a powerful state.”

## *Sumapaz - the consequences of globalization*

We are in Sumapaz, a nature reserve in the south of the rural area of Bogotá, 3 hours by bus from the urban zone. Fog is settling over the lagoon, the air is fresh. One wants to breathe in and fully absorb this beautiful nature into oneself. If you're here, one can hardly imagine that in Bogotá there is water scarcity.

A member of “Bogotá Positiva” explains the connections in this area: Sumapaz is one of the largest drinking water reservoirs in South America. Now Coca-Cola wants to buy it, supposedly for energy production. Coca-Cola? Was this name not on the water we had bought in the city a few days ago: “Agua purificado por coca cola” (cleaned by coca-cola)? Already, Coca-Cola buys water at the lowest price and sells it everywhere. What if the largest drinking water reservoir suddenly is owned by one single private company? No one can live without water - what if we can get it only from the hand of a large corporation? Through the water it becomes clear, how urgently we need global, decentralized and sustainable answers for the future of humanity.

We spend the night in San Juan, a small farmers village nearby. We go to the village shop, and everything that can be bought, are products of Coca Cola and Nestlé. This is how far globalization has progressed: These farmers have to sell, and consume that which is destroying their own existence - the products of the large corporations - and can no longer sell their own products.

## *Transform the pain into hope*

The pilgrimage repeatedly leads to moving encounters with people who have decided, despite or perhaps because of the greatest pain and deepest despair, for a tireless commitment to life, and not follow the path of revenge.

25 years ago 120 people were shot during an occupation of the Palace of Justice, up to this day a



number of them are said to have “disappeared”. At the annual celebration, we meet a man with shining eyes. At that time, his 15-year-old son was murdered, today he is a tireless peace worker. “My hatred was very, very big,” he tells his story, “I wanted not only to kill, but also to sacrifice myself like a kamikaze warrior. I already had the grenades delivered, went to the police station and already left a farewell letter. But then, in the last moment, a child stood in front of me, the same age as my son at that time. I’m sure my son sent the child to me. It spoke to me, and from that moment, the change in my life began. Through a child I understood that murder and revenge are no solution. I had to ask my son to show me what love is. Now I act only out of love for my son and not out of revenge. That I had to learn. “

The people of the Peace Community San José all know this painful process, because after the by now almost 14 years of civil resistance, there is no one who has not lost at least one loved one, a brother or sister, parents, friends or partners. The pain of the world, we in the well-protected societies of Europe and North America barely notice, for us it has become an abstract concept, something that happens somewhere on the other side of the earth. But here it meets up with us very close to our skin – in the people we begin to love.

On the daily walks we carry signs bearing the names of those who were murdered. Once the train was stopped, and through the megaphone sounded a question: “Who carries the image of Ramiro Correa? His daughter wants to carry it!” All of a sudden one starts to experience with the

*„Be the Change“: At a performance of the youth theatre in front of one thousand colombian students*

heart, what human misery is behind the news reports we know from television. It is an ocean of tears, which opens up to those who no longer close their compassionate heart. This is one of the experiences that we have in all GRACE pilgrimages. It brings one to seek a really deep answer to the pain of the world in an ever more existential and absolute way.

High up in the Paramo of Sumapaz, Eduar Lanchero, a leader of San José de Apartado, holds a charismatic speech about the depth of the peace community. He talks about the history and says: “In everything that happened to the community, there were two moments that were extremely painful: The murder of Ramiro Correa in 1997, committed by the guerrillas, and the murder of Luis Eduardo Guerra in 2005, committed by the army and paramilitary. These were moments of the most intense pain, where the community almost broke. What did the community do in these moments? Here lies the depth of the peace community: to transform the pain into hope.

This is what we did in those 14 years. The state and the paramilitaries recognize: We have done everything to them and could never destroy them. They wonder: What else can we do to them? The blindness with which all murderers are defeated, does not allow them to see that they can do to us whatever they want: There will always be community, as long as from the pain arises hope. This can not be destroyed.”

He concludes by asking, "And what is the hope?" and describes the profound peace ethics of the community: "Hope is when we no longer hate the murderers. Hope is when we collectively do not make death, but life into reality, today, wherever we are. The peace community has no future - it has the present. If we sit here today and do not create community, then we have lost hope. Hope is not the tomorrow, hope is this day."

### *Creating Models*

Following the pilgrimage, 20 international participants accompany the peace community to San Josecito, to assist them in Mulatos during their General Assembly, to protect them by their presence and to come to agreements on further cooperation. The peace community is working with Tamera on the Global Campus, an emerging global education initiative for the establishment of new peace models: By the joining together of peace projects, a training platform is to be established, where the already existing peace knowledge can be learned, which is needed today in all places, where people survive outside of the destructive system and want to build a new, decentralized, non-violent and sustainable culture of peace - knowledge of ecology, technology and social organization. At the beginning of 2010 the community started in Mulatos, at the place where the leader Luis Eduardo Guerra was murdered five years ago, with the construction of a new center for this purpose.

### *Support of the global community now*

Sabine Lichtenfels: "The first step of the pilgrimage is done, but now further steps are needed. Now the call for justice for the peace community and the peace movement around the country may not fade again. The hopeful events must now be followed by a wave of global solidarity and support, that brings about the change. The time is ripe, and nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

In this spirit, we ask you all to help to strengthen the protection of the peace community, to sign the example letter (or your own letter) and send it to the president by mail. Please forward this text and the letter to all friends, so that a large wave of solidarity may emerge that will give the pilgrimage a lasting effect.

**Thank you for your cooperation!**