

Why Did They Kill the Children?

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(Translated with the permission of Semana by Anne Schoeneborn, a CSN volunteer translator)

Four years after the massacre in San José de Apartadó, during which three children were decapitated and dismembered, SEMANA reconstructs what happened during those horror-filled days and the cover-up that followed.

In February 2005, Armando Gordillo experienced both heaven and hell in the space of less than one week. While providing security for the television stars filming the reality show “Desafío 2005” at the lively beaches of Capurganá on the Caribbean coast, the Army captain received a phone call. He was ordered to go to Nueva Antioquia, near Apartadó, because Operation ‘Fénix,’ planned by the Seventeenth Brigade, was scheduled to begin.

Only a few weeks prior to the day Gordillo received the phone call, the brigade had received its heaviest blow in recent years, and the heaviest since Álvaro Uribe was elected president. In the neighborhood of El Porroso in Mutatá, one officer and 18 soldiers were killed in a FARC ambush. The brigade had been unable to explain what had happened. They said there were problems with communication, that it had been an ambush. Whatever the explanation, General Héctor Fandiño and all the high officials of the brigade were pained and humiliated by this blow, and the General was even sanctioned.

Because of this recent history, the order to take part in an operation with various battalions near the canyon of the Mulatos River, where the 5th and 58th Fronts of the FARC were known to have a camp, did not surprise Gordillo. Also, ‘Samir,’ a particularly feared guerilla, was known frequently to hide out in the area. Neither did it surprise Gordillo to find members of his battalion, both officers and soldiers, meeting with a paramilitary group when he arrived in Nueva Antioquia on February 17th. This was not the first time that had happened. Everyone knew that Don Berna’s “Bloque Héroes de Tolová” had its operational headquarters on the La Hoz Hill, where the logistics of the operation were being planned. Two months prior, the “Bloque Bananeros de Urabá” had been demobilized and its members were thought to be reintegrating into civilian life under the command of Ever Veloza, ‘H.H.’

According to Gordillo, when he arrived in Nueva Antioquia his superiors of the Vélez Battalion, Lieutenant Coronel Orlando Espinoza and Major José Fernando Castaño, had already coordinated everything with the paramilitaries of the Héroes de Tolová. In fact, the Alacrán Company of the Contraguerrilla 33 Battalion had already left and was headed toward Las Nieves. The group was being guided by a paramilitary known as ‘Melaza,’ who had been recently demobilized and had long been an acquaintance of the members of

the military and a regular visitor of the Seventeenth Brigade. He had no problem dressing in fatigues and carrying an official gun while also communicating via radio with the other companies in the area.

Gordillo was assigned to a paramilitary group coordinated by alias '44' that included various thugs, such as 'Kiko,' 'Cobra' and 'Pirulo.' Gordillo told the Attorney General's Office, "They said that they knew the area, knew of FARC camps and hiding-places near the Mulatos canyon... that the operation had already been spoken about with superiors."

The events that followed show that the operation was one of revenge. The victims of the raid would be civilians, several of them children, who were decapitated and dismembered in a barbarous act rivaling the massacres of 'chualitas' in the period of La Violencia.

The troops proceeded slowly, detaining the few campesinos that crossed their path. 'Melaza' guided the men of Battalion 33 and frequently put the official commanding the group in touch with the troops who had remained behind. Adriano José Cando, 'Melaza,' was then 25 years old and had often worked for the army. "I earned 15,000 pesos per day and bonuses, depending on the results of the particular operation." This is how it had worked since he joined the paramilitaries in 1997, and this is how it had continued on numerous occasions since he handed in his weapons. It was all "with the prior authorization from the Reference Center for Demobilized Troops," he explains.

Since childhood he had been a mule driver and thus knew the area of Urabá like the back of his hand. He had also been in San José de Apartadó on numerous occasions. How could he not know those paths, since in 2001 he had participated in the massacre of six campesinos in the region? This time he went hooded but many recognized him. 'Melaza' was a name associated with death.

The troops had information that there was a guerrilla in Las Nieves and at daybreak on February 20th, they approached a small house. "We arrived at about 6:00 in the morning. It was a little hut in the middle of nowhere. We surrounded the house and Lieutenant Rodríguez stuck the tip of his gun into the window. The guerrilla reached for an AK-47, and we all shot at the house. It ended up riddled with bullet holes, and although he was mortally wounded, the guerrilla continued shooting. When everything calmed down, we saw a black child and the wife of the guerrilla, who came out with a completely bloody 2 year-old girl in her arms. 'You killed my child,' she said. She had not even realized that she was naked. I approached her and said, 'Miss, go and put on some clothes.'"

Marcelino Moreno, 'Macho Rucio,' was in fact a guerilla and he appears to have died in combat. The child was injured but survived because she received first aid and was then airlifted out by helicopter. The children of Luis Eduardo Guerra and Alfonso Tuberquia, whose encounter was with the troops lagging behind, were not so fortunate.

Without mercy

That Sunday, when Luis Eduardo Guerra heard the faraway gunshots and the army helicopter, he decided against going out to harvest cacao. At the time, Guerra was the most prominent leader of the Peace Community of San José of Apartadó. This community had been born ten years before as an experiment in civil resistance against the war, under the special leadership of the Jesuit priest Javier Giraldo and the ex-mayor of Apartadó, Gloria Cuartas. The community had been the target of every type of criticism and public accusation by the government, which maintained that they collaborated with the FARC. Its members had also been the victims of countless attacks and selective assassinations. Luis Eduardo Guerra, despite his rural background, was a man with an oratory gift. He had a way of thinking in such a structured way that it generated suspicion from his adversaries, who considered him to be an ideologue in favor of the guerrillas. He was one of those exceptional cases, someone with talent who was self-taught. “He got up at 4:00 in the morning to listen to the news and after working in the fields he would read history and philosophy, he was very disciplined,” explains one of the community’s leaders. In fact, Guerra was a representative of sorts for the Peace Community.

The following day, on February 21st, Guerra finally decided to go out to his fields with his 17-year-old partner, Bellanira, and his 11 year-old son, Deiner, who rode on the back of a mule, and his half-brother, Darío. Shortly after they left, around 8:00am, a group of soldiers emerged from the bushes and stopped them. From the start, Darío feared the worst. He noticed that the soldiers were acting strangely. He had the feeling, which turned out to be accurate, that there were paramilitaries with the soldiers. When he noticed that all the attention of the soldiers was focused on Luis Eduardo, he slipped behind the mule and ran into the bushes. Shortly thereafter he heard cries of pain and fear, but no gunshots. They killed them with clubs and machetes. They decapitated them. And although Gordillo says he does not know anything about those first deaths, investigators believe that it was a mix of his military troops and paramilitaries who were there.

Four hours away in Resbalosa, around noon, the same scene repeated itself, but this time with even more cruelty. According to various testimonies, including that of Captain Gordillo, the paramilitaries, under the command of ‘44,’ went about 500 meters ahead of the soldiers. They arrived at the home of Alfonso Bolívar, another prominent leader of the Peace Community, while the family was eating lunch. A firefight began with Alejandro Pérez, a man proven by the district attorney to be a FARC guerilla, and he ran a few meters before falling down, his body riddled with bullets. The paramilitaries set off various explosives outside of the house and watched as five men ran out. It was Bolívar and his workers. What happened next is indescribable.

Jorge Luis Salgado, alias ‘Kiko,’ the currently imprisoned paramilitary of the Bloque Héroes de Tolová, told the Attorney General’s Office what happened that afternoon. “I saw a dead woman on the floor... all of a sudden it was reported to the Commanders that there were some children inside the house... the commanders were asked what should be done with these children and they concluded that they would pose a threat in the future, that they would grow up and become guerillas... for that reason they ordered them to be

silently executed... at that moment the children's father appeared with a farming tool in his hand... the children all yelled 'papa!'... he told them that nothing was going to happen and begged the commanders not to kill the children... then he kneeled down with his hands on the back of his head... the children ran toward him... this was when the father, now aware of what was going to happen, told the boy that they were going to go on a long trip and that they might not return... the girl went to pack some clothes for the boy in a small bag and brought it to him waving goodbye with her hand..."

Bolívar had managed to run and hide at a neighbor's place, but after an hour he felt bad for having left behind his 24 year-old wife, Sandra Milena, and their small children, Natalia, 5, and Santiago, 18 months. He returned home to face death. All were killed and buried by their killers in a grave near their house. The neighbors, who passed by the following day once the troops had left, said that all they saw were traces of blood, the turned over soil and a machete with a blade dulled from chopping bones.

According to the testimony of the paramilitaries, at this point, Captain Gordillo found out what had happened. However, the joint operation continued for three more days, practically until the scandal of the massacre hit the international press. During the whole week, the Office of the Attorney General could not collect the dead bodies. Father Javier Giraldo says that the explanation the judicial authorities gave him was that they needed the army's protection and transport, but that the brigade had told them "no helicopters were available." Nevertheless, in testimonies found in the records, it is reported that General Héctor Fandiño and Colonel Néstor Iván Duque traveled via helicopter to join the troops on Thursday of that week. What they found out on that day or what decisions they made remains a mystery. One thing we do know is that on that same day the paramilitaries left the area.

By then, 110 people from the community and international observers had already gone by foot to recover the bodies. They arrived at the house of Tuberquia and surrounded the graves awaiting the arrival of officials. One of the first to arrive was an official with a cold look in his eyes and who haughtily addressed those grieving, "I am Captain Gordillo and I have come to offer you protection." On that Friday evening, the 25th of February, the exhumation began. The following day they would find the bodies of Luis Eduardo and his family near the river, devoured by animals. As vile as these crimes were, efforts to cover them up followed.

Obstruction of Justice?

From the beginning, Father Javier Giraldo pointed his finger at the army. "I spoke with many campesinos and their versions of the story convinced me of their guilt." However, criticism rained down on him. Who could imagine that the army could be involved in a crime the principal victims of which were children?

The dead had not even been laid to rest when the media began to broadcast the testimony of two supposedly demobilized FARC guerillas, who accused the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó of having ties to guerillas, and who declared that the guerrillas had

carried out this terrible massacre. The ex-guerrillas were Elkin Tuberquia and Apolinar Guerra, and were under the protection of Colonel Néstor Iván Duque, the then commander of the Bejarano Battalion of the Seventeenth Brigade. Their claims were quite implausible, but they confused the matter from the start.

Also, the commander of the Army, General Carlos Alberto Ospina, made an effort to explain, with maps in hand, that the coordinates of the troops' location demonstrated that they were far from the area where the massacre had occurred. We now know that an official ordered that their location be altered from the moment that the operation was planned. As if that weren't enough, even the government, before lamenting the massacre and pressing for an explanation, passed judgment on the community by denying the presence of military and police in the area.

Justice was at a standstill because although it was clear that the massacre had been an act of the military troops and paramilitaries, no one knew where to start because the Peace Community refused to talk. It ended up being the testimony of 'Melaza' that began to unravel the web of conflicting stories.

The Justice System Finally Takes Action

Everything could have remained in the shadow of impunity if it had not been for the diligent work of one government lawyer. Since the Peace Community was overcome by distrust and refused to speak with representatives of the justice system, the government prosecutors and investigators began to scrape together evidence wherever they could. Two years ago, the Attorney General's Office, in an effort to break the apparent pact of silence, made the very unusual move of calling in for questioning 60 members of the Seventeenth Brigade, who might have participated in the crimes.

At the end of 2007, the plot took a definitive turn. 'Melaza' had been captured during the investigation of the death of Carlos Castaño. Although he was initially going to participate in the attack on the head of the AUC, he was later dismissed and in the end was not involved. He had already been absolved of the crime and was about to be set free when a prosecutor remembered that in a book by Germán Castro Caycedo, someone called 'Melaza' was mentioned in association with the massacre in San José de Apartadó. He was called to testify in the case. All 'Melaza' was able to say was "I didn't kill those children."

From prison in Itagüí, where he spoke with SEMANA, the ex-paramilitary stood by his story, "the government asks for the truth, but what for if they can't handle it." From the beginning, his testimony incriminated Captain Gordillo. Gordillo, in turn, incriminated his superiors by saying that in November of 2007 "I met with General Fandiño in an apartment of the 106. He showed me 'Melaza's' statement and said that I would probably be called in for questioning... he told me that under no circumstances was I to admit that we had armed civilian guides or any personnel with us who weren't soldiers... that statements had already been made by two FARC informants (Tuberquia and Guerra) indicating that those people had been killed by the 58th Front."

But Gordillo's luck had run out. By the end of the month he had been captured. Shortly thereafter, upon hearing the charges against him, he realized there was nothing he could do. He pled guilty and accepted a plea agreement. He confessed that his troops had gone on patrols with paramilitaries and it was understood that they did this in order to commit barbarous acts that would incite terror. Because of this, ten members of the military have been called to trial, including Colonel Espinosa and Major Castaño. The prosecutor, Mario Iguarán, announced that General Héctor Fandiño, the commander of the Brigade at the time, would also be investigated.

At least six of the paramilitaries who participated in the massacre have died. The paramilitary with the alias '44,' who had key pieces of information regarding what happened, was murdered last year in Valencia, Córdoba. 'Melaza' and 'Kiko' are being closely guarded in prison because of the threats they have received.

History has vindicated the much-criticized Father Javier Giraldo. His claims, which seemed inconceivable, were gradually confirmed. However, he himself is close to imprisonment due to an accusation of slander lodged against him by Colonel Duque, to which Giraldo has responded with the radical claim of being a conscientious objector and has refused to appear in court and give testimony.

Ironically, the strong man of the FARC in San José de Apartadó, 'Samir,' the one who the military accused of committing the massacre, was demobilized in December and since then has participated in the Seventeenth Brigade's operations all around Urabá. His testimony will be key in this case.

The justice system is trying to unravel the questions still being raised in this complex investigation. Who planned the joint operation? Did it have to do with revenge against the community for FARC offensives? Was justice intentionally thwarted?

In the meantime, Gordillo, without a shade of regret in his eyes, awaits judgment in a military prison. In a second military prison, the 10 members of the military awaiting trial continue to deny everything.

Original Spanish text:

<http://www.semana.com/noticias-nacion/mataron-ninos/122728.aspx>

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