Fragmented Identities in a Nation at War

Identidades fragmentadas en una nación en guerra

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Introduction: Decades of Conflict and “Multiple Colombias”

Colombia’s decades-long armed conflict – spanning over half a century – has deeply scarred its people and fragmented its national identity. The 2016 peace accord formally ended a 53-year civil war with the FARC guerrillas
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, yet violence persists as new armed groups fill the void in many regions. The human toll has been immense: Colombia has over 5.6 million internally displaced people, mostly uprooted from rural villages into city slums (the highest number of IDPs in the world after Syria)
story.internal-displacement.org
. This prolonged turmoil created what many call “multiple Colombias” – disparate worlds within one country. Urban centers under government control and remote rural zones long dominated by rebels or paramilitaries evolved starkly different experiences of governance, security, and legitimacy. In effect, parts of Colombia were **effectively governed by armed groups** rather than the state for years. For example, by the late 1990s the FARC insurgency maintained *“nearly complete control”* over the entire department of Guaviare – even local mayors paid guerrilla “taxes” to get roads built – filling the vacuum left by *“virtually no state presence”*
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. In other neglected rural regions, paramilitary warlords or drug cartels likewise became de facto authorities. Meanwhile, cities like Bogotá, Medellín or Cali lived a more “normal” reality with formal institutions in charge. This **geographical split** – between a modern urban Colombia and a forgotten rural Colombia – underlies many of the psychological and cultural fractures that persist today.

Psychological and Cultural Impacts in Conflict Zones

In the countryside, decades of violence have left deep psychological wounds and shaped local culture in subtle ways. Communities in long-suffering departments – **Cauca, Meta, Guaviare, La Guajira**, among others – have endured chronic fear, grief, and disruption of traditional life. In Cauca (southwest Colombia), which remains one of the most violence-torn regions, residents face constant threats from guerrillas, paramilitary successors, and narco-traffickers. The homicide rate in Cauca reached a shocking 56.1 per 100,000 in 2023 – higher than that of countries like Haiti or Ecuador
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– and **mass displacement** continues unabated as entire villages flee combat. *“The dynamics of conflict, including forced displacement by violence and recruitment… have greatly exacerbated long-term problems… such as extreme poverty, social exclusion… and gender-based violence,”* explained one humanitarian worker in northern Cauca
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. Daily life in these rural warzones has been characterized by **chronic trauma** and survival instincts. In villages of Meta and Guaviare – areas around Villavicencio and the Amazon foothills that were strongholds of the FARC – generations grew up with the sounds of gunfire as a backdrop. Parents taught children to be wary of strangers (who might be informants or recruiters), and many families kept bags packed in case they had to suddenly flee. Over time, a culture of *"resilience"* and wary adaptation took root. For instance, in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities of Cauca and the Pacific coast, people often speak of **"resistencia" (resistance)** – not only armed resistance, but cultural resilience. They have developed local traditions of remembrance and coping: community plays, songs, and storytelling that keep alive their history and provide emotional release. *"Art allows us to transform the tragedy of war into jokes or stories that make people laugh… It allows people who are overwhelmed by the conflict to smile in spite of it. It's a release,"* says a 17-year-old youth leader from Cauca who uses theater to help her community confront trauma
thenewhumanitarian.org
. Likewise, another young woman from northern Cauca leads a musical group to *"give visibility to [our] situation"* and show that *"every young person who picks up a paintbrush, an instrument, or a pencil is one less person who picks up a gun… That's how we resist. That's how we build peace."*
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. These expressions underscore a remarkable cultural endurance: even after years of brutality, many rural Colombians have found ways to heal collectively – through art, music, ritual, and tight-knit community bonds – to preserve their dignity and identity.

However, the **psychological scars** run deep. In isolated farming hamlets, it is not uncommon to find older adults who quietly carry decades of grief – for lost relatives, for land abandoned, for dreams deferred. Children in conflict zones often exhibit signs of trauma: anxiety, aggression, or nightmares. Teachers in Caquetá or Arauca (other conflict-heavy areas) have reported that students draw pictures of soldiers and guns as everyday scenery. In Cauca, armed groups have even **attacked schools**, and *"the emotional and mental health issues related to conflict"* contribute to students dropping out
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. Culturally, living through war has normalized certain survival behaviors. In some villages, people still avoid congregating in large groups or venturing out after dark, habits ingrained from years when any misstep could provoke violence. Trust has also been a casualty of war – many rural communities exhibit deep skepticism of outsiders and a guardedness borne of having been caught in the crossfire between multiple armed factions. This long-term erosion of social fabric contributes to the sense that there is *"no single Colombian reality,"* but rather many fragmented pieces, each with its own scars and ways of coping.

Authority, Survival, and Honoring Fallen Fighters

One striking outcome of state absence in conflict zones is the complex relationship between civilians and the **armed groups** that held sway over them. In areas where guerrillas or paramilitaries have acted as the only authority for years, local inhabitants often developed a mix of fear, grudging respect, and practical dependence on these actors. This helps explain why communities in conflict zones might even **honor fallen leaders of illegal armed groups** – not necessarily out of ideological alignment, but as a matter of imposed authority and survival logic. When a local warlord or guerrilla commander dies, the mourning displayed by villagers can be a survival strategy, a cultural adaptation, or even a genuine expression of respect for whatever order that figure imposed.

For example, in **Norte de Santander**, residents in the remote Catatumbo region famously built a shrine to a slain narco-guerrilla boss, Víctor Navarro, alias *"Megateo."* When Megateo was killed by security forces, *"inhabitants of the region hid his remains and constructed an altar in his honor"*, reinforcing his legend as a Robin Hood-like figure in a poor, conflict-ridden community
insightcrime.org

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. Megateo had garnered local goodwill by using drug wealth to build a town park and donate school supplies and Christmas gifts to villagers
insightcrime.org

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. The loyalty he cultivated was not mere fanaticism – it was a transactional relationship in a vacuum of state services. As InSight Crime analysts noted, his charity was *"not mere altruism"* but helped him create a supportive informant network and mystique that kept him safe for years
insightcrime.org
. For the community, publicly venerating Megateo (even in death) made sense: he had been their benefactor and de facto ruler, and honoring him could ensure favor with whatever power structure followed – or at least protect them from retribution by his followers.

A similar scene played out in **Urabá, Antioquia**, a region once dominated by paramilitary militias. In 2017, a top crime boss and ex-paramilitary, Luis Padierna (alias *"Inglaterra"*), was killed by the Colombian military. To the surprise of outside observers, the people of Carepa (a town in Urabá) received his body **"with music and a caravan of motorcycles"**, crying and honoring the fallen capo
elpais.com
. As his coffin passed through the streets, a crowd followed in a **multitude procession**, some even wearing T-shirts printed with his face
elpais.com
. The mayor of the town, watching this display, dryly remarked, *"Unfortunately, people outside the law also manage to have many fans."*
elpais.com
. This starkly illustrates how *"heroes"* and *"villains"* can trade places in communities where the **legal state was long absent**. A paramilitary commander like "Inglaterra" had provided a semblance of order

(albeit through violence) and perhaps economic livelihood (through the drug trade) in Carepa; when he died, locals honored him because *in their lived reality he had been the authority.*

Such **honoring of armed group leaders** does not usually signify that villagers fully believed in the political ideology of FARC or the ultraconservative ethos of the paramilitaries. Rather, it reflects a survival calculus and the social order that war imprinted on these areas. Under guerrilla or paramilitary rule, communities learned to show loyalty and respect – genuine or performative – to avoid deadly punishment. In eastern Colombia's Arauca province, for instance, one merchant described how the ELN guerrillas enforce strict rules on daily life: *"You can't talk to the army, you can't leave the house late at night. If we don't comply… the penalty is death."*
hrw.org
. Living under those conditions, civilians internalize the need to publicly defer to armed commanders. Thus, when those commanders are killed, locals may hold elaborate funerals **as a form of self-protection** (to prove they were "good subjects" of the fallen ruler) and because these figures filled roles – judge, police, provider – that the state never did. In some cases, over years a kind of personal loyalty or gratitude can form as well: a community might remember that *"Commander X"* once stopped a massacre or provided medicine, and so they sincerely mourn his loss despite not sharing his guerilla cause. These complexities underscore the morally gray survival strategies of communities caught in conflict – to outsiders it may seem perplexing to hail a criminal as a hero, but for those villagers, it can be a rational adaptation to an imposed reality.

Urban vs. Rural Views of the State and Peace

The long war not only fragmented authority on the ground – it also fostered **divergent perceptions of the government, military, and peace efforts** between urban and rural Colombians. Broadly speaking, people in major cities tend to have more trust in state institutions and greater physical security, while those in conflict-torn rural areas often view the state with ambivalence or outright distrust. This divergence was starkly illustrated in the 2016 peace plebiscite: many of the regions hardest-hit by the war **voted overwhelmingly in favor of the peace accord**, while some urban and relatively unaffected areas voted "No," narrowly defeating the deal at first
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. It was one of Colombia's great paradoxes: *"just in the places… most battered by violence, the 'Sí' (yes) won decisively,"* as one analysis noted – those who *"put the most dead"* on the battlefield strongly supported ending the conflict
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. In contrast, opposition to the accord was higher in parts of the country that had seen less direct fighting (including some urban centers and midland regions), reflecting a disconnect in understanding between the Colombia that *lived* the war and the Colombia that mostly watched it on TV.

For many rural communities, the **Colombian government's presence has historically been minimal or purely militarized**. Peasants in zones like Arauca, Caquetá, or northern Cauca often knew the state mainly through sporadic army operations – which sometimes brought more chaos than security – or through the absence of clinics, schools, and roads. *"Remote parts of Colombia where law enforcement and judicial processes rarely reach"* have been left *"undefended"* and at the mercy of armed groups hrw.org
. In such places, it is common to hear villagers speak of the government as an distant, sometimes predatory force: soldiers who come to clash with rebels and then leave, or politicians who make promises and never return. This breeds a **profound skepticism toward official institutions**. For example, during the military's counter-insurgency offensives in the 2000s (height of Plan Colombia), many rural civilians suffered abuses like mass displacements and even extrajudicial killings by state forces
colombiareports.com
. In Guaviare, a heavy-handed coca eradication campaign *"led to the displacement of thousands"* of poor farmers and left *"vast human rights violations… in their wake"*
colombiareports.com
. Memories of such events mean that in conflict zones, **the government's legitimacy is often tainted** – seen as another actor in a long cycle of violence, not necessarily as a benevolent protector.

By contrast, urban Colombians – especially in the biggest cities – generally experience the state in more familiar ways: police patrolling neighborhoods, functioning courts and services, elected local officials who (despite corruption) handle everyday governance. City dwellers, especially the middle class, may thus view the **police and army as protectors** against crime or instability. That said, urban perspectives are not monolithic either. Major cities have their own *internal divides*: poor peripheral barrios often feel neglected by the state much like rural villages do. The massive **National Strike ("Paro Nacional") protests in 2019–2021** revealed urban frustration with police violence and government ineptitude, as thousands of young people in Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín took to the streets to demand social change. Deadly clashes in Cali's poorer sectors underscored that even in cities, state authority can lose legitimacy when it is seen as abusive. Still, comparatively speaking, cities have a constant state presence and haven't experienced rival armed groups imposing law. One Medellín resident put it simply: *"Here we complain about corruption or inequality, but we never doubted who was in charge. In my uncle's village (in Cauca), they never knew if tomorrow the 'law' would be the army or the guerrilla."* This anecdote highlights how **predictability of governance** differs. Urban Colombians might critique their government but fundamentally recognize it as the sovereign authority. Many rural Colombians, on the other hand, became politically cynical or disengaged, having learned that *power* on the ground belonged to whichever armed faction arrived next.

These differing lived experiences also color attitudes toward peace initiatives. In cities, peace is often discussed in abstract or moral terms – a noble goal to end conflict and improve the country's international image. Urban populations largely welcomed the 2016 peace negotiations, but some were swayed by fears (fueled by political discourse) that the agreement was too lenient on FARC rebels. In rural communities directly affected by war, peace is an **urgent, tangible need** – literally the difference between life and death. That is why war-weary villages in Chocó, Cauca, and Meta voted so heavily *Sí*: they were willing to forgive the rebels if it meant an end to bloodshed

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. Yet many of those same communities feel disillusioned in the aftermath, as violence continued from other groups. A farmer in southern Meta might tell you, “Peace hasn’t arrived here” – the FARC’s exit simply gave rise to criminal dissidents or paramilitary successors. In contrast, an average citizen in Bogotá can feel at relative peace and may be surprised to hear that **Colombia’s war is not truly over** in the periphery. This asymmetry feeds the notion of *“two Colombias”*: one where the state rules and conflict is an afterthought, and another where the state is distrusted and conflict is a daily threat.

Displacement, Trauma, and Community Resilience

One of the most pervasive effects of the conflict has been **forced displacement**, which links rural and urban experiences and further shapes attitudes toward both state and non-state actors. Millions of Colombians from conflict zones have been uprooted from their homes and pushed into unfamiliar urban environments, carrying their trauma with them. Their journey and resettlement have profoundly influenced how they view the government, society, and future.

Displaced people often feel doubly victimized: first by the armed groups that drove them out, and then by the hardships of city life where the state offers minimal support. Take *Paula*, a community leader who was displaced from the Villavicencio area (Meta) in 2005. She fled violence in Meta only to encounter new dangers in the Pacific coast region, and eventually ended up in Bogotá’s impoverished outskirts
story.internal-displacement.org
. In the capital, she struggled to survive – at one point she and her husband had to split up to look for work in different cities, and even then could barely afford rent and food
story.internal-displacement.org
. Eventually, Paula built a makeshift house in an informal settlement called Altos de la Florida. Her story is common: *89% of Colombia’s IDPs are displaced from rural to urban areas*, often ending up in **informal shantytowns** that ring cities like Bogotá, Cali, or Cartagena
story.internal-displacement.org
. Life in these settlements is extremely harsh – crowded shacks on invaded land, scant public services, and stigma from longer-term city residents. One displaced woman from Putumayo, now living in a Bogotá slum, described the shock of urban displacement: *“The change from living in the countryside to the city was very hard. I cried every day… Living on a farm is very different from the confinement one feels in a city.”*
story.internal-displacement.org
. For her, the hardest part has been the indignity of lacking basic utilities. *“We have no permanent access to water… no sewage system… the lights barely work. We feel like we **don’t exist** to the authorities,”* she said bluntly
story.internal-displacement.org
. That sentiment – *we do not exist for the state* – is tragically common among displaced families. Having lost their homes to conflict and then been effectively abandoned in urban slums, many

displaced Colombians harbor a deep mistrust of the government. They see a state that failed to protect them from violence and then failed to help them rebuild their lives, leaving them to live as invisible citizens on society's margins
story.internal-displacement.org
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Yet, in the face of trauma and neglect, displaced communities also demonstrate inspiring resilience and solidarity. Often it is these very experiences of loss that galvanize survivors to organize and demand their rights. In Altos de la Florida, Paula and her neighbors formed a strong community network – she received leadership training and now helps run programs to protect women and children
story.internal-displacement.org
. Another displaced woman, *Andrea*, became the secretary of the local community action board, fighting to get her barrio recognized as an official neighborhood so that they can have access to water and sanitation
story.internal-displacement.org

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. *She dreams of the day her community can "write its true address" without shame*, essentially to no longer be invisible
story.internal-displacement.org

story.internal-displacement.org
. This kind of **grassroots resilience** is evident across Colombia: displaced people have formed hundreds of victims' associations, women's collectives, and advocacy groups. These organizations often serve a dual purpose – they are a means of healing (through mutual support and reclaiming dignity) and a platform to engage with the state. In some cases, interactions with sympathetic officials or inclusion in reparations programs have slightly improved displaced persons' faith in the state. More commonly, however, **trust remains low** and displaced communities rely on themselves or NGOs for progress.

Importantly, displacement has also altered attitudes toward **non-state armed actors**. Many campesino families fled because a guerrilla or paramilitary group targeted them; unsurprisingly, they carry deep trauma and anger toward those groups. A peasant who survived a massacre by the paramilitaries, or a campesina who was forced to feed a guerrilla column under threat, will have little love for those actors. In fact, countless victims from rural areas demand justice and truth from FARC or the AUC (the former paramilitary umbrella) as part of healing. Some have found a measure of closure through the Truth Commission or in public apology ceremonies – for example, the people of Bojayá (Chocó) who lost nearly **80 loved ones in a FARC-Paramilitary battle in 2002** later welcomed FARC leaders to ask forgiveness in a poignant reconciliation act
semana.com
. Those processes show a remarkable capacity to forgive but do not erase the psychological scars. On the other hand, displaced people's attitudes can be complex: a villager who fled may still acknowledge that *"at least the guerrilla spared my family"* or *"the paramilitaries punished thieves"* – i.e. they recognize nuances even among victimizers. Still, **few displaced Colombians wish for a return of**

armed rule; what they want is effective state presence so they aren't forced to choose between violent lords or no authority at all.

Finally, the experience of displacement has, in some ways, created **new bonds between urban and rural society**. As rural victims resettle in cities, they bring their stories to new audiences. Urban churches, universities, and NGOs have increasingly heard first-hand accounts of the war from displaced members, fostering empathy and awareness in places previously insulated from the conflict. This mixing might slowly mend the divide between the "two Colombias." Indeed, many displaced youth who grow up in the city become cultural bridges – they retain the memory and accent of the countryside, while adapting to urban life and advocating for their communities' needs in the political arena. Their resilience and activism challenge the state to address longstanding injustices and could help forge a more inclusive national identity in the long run.

Dreams for a Better Future: Converging or Diverging?

Despite the fragmentation of experiences, **Colombians across the spectrum often envision a strikingly similar better future** – one grounded in peace, opportunity, and social justice – even if the emphasis can differ by region. After so many years of bloodshed, there is a broad shared yearning for *"un país en paz."* As one young professional in Medellín put it: *"Sueño con un país en paz, con equidad, where there are many opportunities for development for young people, children, [and] campesinos… with significant advances in employment, education, health, infrastructure and above all improved quality of life."*
elcolombiano.com

elcolombiano.com
. His dream of a peaceful, equitable Colombia – free of violence and with better lives for the next generation – resonates widely, from city suburbs to rural hamlets. Similarly, a Colombian campesina (writing from exile) described her dream: *"me sueño con un país en paz **con justicia social**, a country where my children can study and join community organizations without being stigmatized… a democracy that doesn't oppress but encourages us"*
maquinacrisica.org
. The common keywords are **peace, education, opportunity, fairness**. Indeed, across dozens of interviews and testimonies, Colombians frequently express hope for a country that turns the page on violence and offers dignity for all – whether that means a chance to go to university, to have a decent job, or simply to live without fear.

That said, there are nuances and differing priorities shaped by each group's context. **Rural communities** often emphasize land, inclusion, and presence of the state. For many campesinos, the dream of peace is tied to long-delayed agrarian reform – having secure rights to their farmland, technical support, and access to markets so that the countryside can thrive. *"Colombia has fought over land for centuries… [now] peasants dream of a more equitable future,"* President Petro remarked about ongoing land restitution efforts, echoing the aspirations he's heard from rural citizens. In zones like Cauca or Meta, indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders also speak of *"peace with autonomy"* – they want the violence to stop, but also hope for recognition of their self-governance and culture. A Nasa

indigenous leader might dream not only of no more assassinations, but of his people's language and traditions flourishing with full state respect. In **urban areas**, the vision of a better future often revolves around social mobility and good governance. Urban youth talk about a Colombia with less corruption, where talent is rewarded with opportunity at home so young people don't feel forced to emigrate. They imagine cities with improved public transportation, cleaner environments, and inclusive growth that lifts the poor out of marginal barrios. Middle-class city dwellers, on their part, may stress a future where rule of law prevails – where taxes are well spent, the justice system works, and crime is under control (a reflection of frustrations with both petty crime and high-level corruption).

Despite these differences in focus, it's crucial to note the **overlap in core dreams**: virtually everyone, whether a displaced farmer in Guajira or a student in Bogotá, wants *peace* and a chance for a decent life. The end of fear and the beginning of hope is a unifying theme. Colombians also broadly desire greater **unity and reconciliation** after so much polarization. There is a recognition, especially among the younger generation, that the country must bridge its divides to move forward. Social movements and dialogues in recent years have highlighted shared themes – e.g. *"No más guerra"* (no more war) and calls for tackling inequality – which suggest a convergence of aspirations. During the 2019–2021 protests, one striking aspect was seeing urban and rural voices join in solidarity (farmers and indigenous groups marched into Bogotá to support the youth-led demonstrations). This hinted that the dreams of different "Colombias" might be aligning around building a more just and peaceful nation.

Of course, achieving these dreams is another challenge. Many Colombians remain wary – they have dreamed before only to see hopes betrayed by new cycles of violence or political disappointment. Yet, the **collective desire for "nunca más"** (never again to war) is palpable. In community workshops conducted by the Truth Commission, victims and ex-combatants alike often expressed a simple wish: that their children and grandchildren *"do not have to live what we lived."* Whether in a Bogota classroom or a remote Caquetá farm, parents share a hope that the next generation will know a country at peace with itself. Such hopes form a common thread that ties together the multiple Colombias, suggesting that even if experiences have been fragmented, the future Colombians long for has many shared colors.

Conclusion: Toward a More Unified Colombia

Decades of civil conflict have undeniably produced a fragmented national psyche – a Colombia of many parts, where **rural vs. urban, center vs. periphery** differences run deep in mindset and trust. The trauma and survival strategies in long-neglected conflict zones gave rise to local identities sometimes at odds with the urban mainstream. A villager in Cauca or Guaviare might feel they inhabit a *different Colombia* than a resident of Medellín or Bogotá. Yet, as we have seen, these divides are not unbridgeable. The **emotional and social complexity** of Colombia's condition also carries the seeds of common understanding: shared pain, shared resilience, and ultimately shared hopes. The country's cultural fabric – though torn – has threads of solidarity running through it. Peace-building in Colombia today involves recognizing those *"multiple Colombias"* and addressing their distinct needs: providing security and opportunity in forgotten rural corners, honoring the resilience of conflict victims, and including them in national narratives. It also requires urban Colombians to listen to and empathize with their rural compatriots (and vice versa), healing the mistrust born of distance and ignorance.

Encouragingly, first-hand accounts from Colombians across regions reveal **converging aspirations** for a better future – a future without violence, with greater equity and inclusion. In that convergence lies the foundation for a more unified national identity. While the legacy of war will not vanish overnight, Colombians' capacity for forgiveness, adaptation, and hope is a powerful force. It suggests that the many Colombias – the urban Colombia of bustling streets and the rural Colombia of quiet fields, the Colombia of memory and the Colombia of opportunity – can find common ground. The task ahead is to turn those shared dreams into reality by making the state a true presence in all corners of the country and by ensuring that *no Colombian feels invisible or second-class*. If that can be achieved, the psychic rifts etched by decades of conflict may gradually mend, allowing Colombians to finally see themselves as part of one diverse, resilient, and peaceful nation.

Sources: The analysis draws on a range of Colombian testimonies and reports, including humanitarian field reporting from Cauca
thenewhumanitarian.org

thenewhumanitarian.org
, investigative journalism on conflict dynamics in Guaviare
colombiareports.com

colombiareports.com
, human rights documentation of state absence in remote areas
hrw.org
, and local news accounts of community attitudes from Urabá to Bogotá
elpais.com

story.internal-displacement.org
. These first-hand perspectives reflect the *emotional truths* of a country where war's imprint varies widely – yet all underscore the longing for one Colombia at peace.