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'Where there is gold, there are guns'

Paul Christopher Webster | Mar. 2, 2012

FIRST PERSON

As I arrived in Segovia, a small city in Colombia?s Antioquia province, I was startled to see soldiers fully geared for combat -- machine guns poised, helmets strapped tight, field radios crackling -- intently watching the traffic coming into the town, which is a refining center for Antioquia?s booming gold industry. ?We have one of the army?s antiterrorism units stationed here,? a local friend explained. ?In Colombia, wherever there is gold, there are guns. Lots of them.?

I?d been warned that even though the government of Colombia says its war for territorial control is over, this is not entirely true. In parts of Antioquia, highly armed guerrillas, paramilitary forces and criminal bands still roam freely. Attracted by easy money from gold miners, these groups are a murderously dangerous threat, which is why the army is on high alert in places like Segovia. And Segovia is far from unique: The government has yet to gain full control in almost a 10th of the country. Not coincidentally, many of the regions that continue to be conspicuously dangerous are those where there is gold.

Five hundred years after King Ferdinand of Spain sent his conquistadors to Latin America with instructions to get gold ?humanely if possible, but at all costs, get gold,? gold and violence remain inextricably entangled in Colombia. But gold-propelled violence isn?t a problem restricted solely to militarized places like Segovia, where gold fuels a low-level war that would otherwise have burned out long ago. In Colombia, I found, even communities that are fully demilitarized sometimes live in fear of gold-triggered violence.

Just a few days before visiting Segovia, I was standing in the town square in Marmato, another gold-rich community about a 10-hour drive to the south. A local schoolteacher was telling me there were no soldiers in the town, and no need for them: ?This is a completely peaceful place,? she told me. ?The war never really came here.?

But that reassuring message belied the fact that I?d come to Marmato precisely because there has been recent violence in the community, which is one of Colombia?s oldest gold-mining centers. Just six months earlier, amid a bitter local row over the town?s spectacular gold wealth, the village priest, Fr. José Reinel Restrepo, had been murdered.

Over the course of three days in Marmato, I asked dozens of people about the murder. I was repeatedly told there was no firm evidence that Restrepo had been killed because of his outspoken stance in a dispute between local artisanal miners and powerful outsiders aiming to capitalize on the fact that the town sits above $10 billion mother lode of gold.

But I also quickly came to realize that people in the Marmato area are deeply worried that there may be more violence to come: Pressure to industrialize the local industry -- which still practices dangerous and dirty 19th-century artisanal mining and milling techniques -- is intensifying. With support from the Colombian government, foreign corporate interests want control of Marmato?s gold. And many people in Marmato say they

will fight to defend their ancestral stakes. Among the town?s worst pessimists, the fear is that Restrepo?s murder -- which came after he warned that a violent fight might be coming -- signals that paramilitary groups have begun to intrude in the matter. But even among optimists in Marmato, gold is seen as both a blessing and a curse.

That thought traveled with me when I left Marmato and headed for Bogotá, Colombia?s capital. After touching down at El Dorado Airport -- a name almost *too* fitting for my journey -- I headed for the city?s most famous attraction: an entrancing museum entirely devoted to the pivotal and far from benign role of gold in Colombian culture and history. Then -- as part of my assignment for *NCR* to write about Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton?s mission with the Colombia Support Network to investigate Restrepo?s death -- I began a series of visits with Colombian politicians, bureaucrats and analysts knowledgeable about the often grim truths behind Colombia?s fast-expanding gold industry.

Over the course of a week spent crisscrossing Bogotá?s massive urban sprawl, I visited the presidential palace, various corporate headquarters, an embassy, the offices of a national political party, and several human rights agencies. In each of these places the people I met with all agreed on the need to balance the expansion of foreign-backed industrial mining companies with the need to sustain local, small-scale miners. Gold, everyone said, has spawned far too much violence.

Reassuring as this message was, it wasn?t until I visited the concrete and brick bunker that houses the offices of the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), a Jesuit-run human rights research center, that I realized the truly colossal scale of Colombia?s ongoing problems with gold-driven violence.

In just a few blunt sentences, Luis Guerrero, CINEP?s associate director, laid out the whole appalling situation: ?At least 5 million people have been displaced by war in Colombia. And when one looks at the map of Colombia over the last decades, where the fighting has been harshest, and people most severely displaced, is exactly where the mining and other business projects are concentrated.? Mass displacement, in Guerrero?s view, has in more than a few instances served the aims of Colombia?s closely intertwined web of business, military and political elites. ?They needed these territories emptied in order to create development without people getting in the way. Now that these territories are emptied out the next step is foreign investment, not only from the U.S. and Canada but from Europe and the rest of the world.?

A few days after meeting Guerrero, I found myself in a place called Ciudad Bolívar, which is very possibly Bogota?s least glamorous attraction. Planted on a treeless and sunbaked mountainside on the far outskirts of the city, Ciudad Bolívar is a giant slum where well over 1 million people displaced by Colombia?s decades-long civil war have involuntarily resettled in a barren landscape of despair. It was here that I met Vanessa, a 12-year-old girl forced to leave her childhood home in a faraway village last year after paramilitary groups began threatening the family. ?They came looking for my brother and threatened to kill all of us,? Vanessa explained to me. ?We quickly moved away.?

Thousands of new people continue to arrive in Ciudad Bolivar every month as a result of conflict in the regions where they come from. Sure enough, when I looked up Vanessa?s village on the map, it was in a gold-producing zone.

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