

We want them alive, free and in peace

Where are they? What have they done with them? Where did they take them? ... What has happened to my son, my daughter, my mother, my father, my brother?

by **Teresita Gaviria Urrego**

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On March 19, this year, the Association of Paths of Hope of Mothers from La Candelaria had their seventh anniversary. We celebrated the occasion in the Berrío main square in Medellín. To be more precise, on the porch of the church that bears the name of our organization. There, we once again proclaimed our slogan: "We want them alive, free and in peace".

This is a simple proclamation which bursts forth spontaneously from the hearts of those whose dear ones have been forcibly disappeared. Since that day in 1999, every Wednesday at midday, the 58 mothers who are members of the association harangue, implore and raise our voices in protest so that those responsible for the horrible disappearances may hear our demand. The heart of one who suffers the uncertainty of such a loss can never rest, whether she has lost a son, a daughter, a mother, a father, a brother, a husband or a partner. Society must understand this daily anguish of ours.

As victims, relatives, friends and, above all, mothers, we have organized our association to seek the return of those who have disappeared or been kidnapped. And although most of those belonging to us who have disappeared were from the East and South West of Antioquia, as well as from Urabá and the lower Cauca Valley region, the association collaborates with other initiatives which are working, as we are, to get recognition for the dignity of our loved ones who are no longer with us. We are following the example of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, and we hope that we, too, will have the chance, as they did, to express our anguish. In the midst of our grief, we have a clear aim: we want to know the truth and we want justice to be done, so that we can again feel the warmth and affection of those who are absent. And we claim this because we are suffering from a permanent sense of anguish and a total uncertainty about what has been the fate of those who have disappeared. There can be no real reparation. The harm done is irreparable.

How is it possible that people can disappear without anyone ever having news of them ever again? My son Cristian Camilo disappeared in 2000, when he was only 15 years old. He went off to Bogotá with a couple of friends. I was told that on the Medellín-Bogotá highway, near Doradal, some armed men made all the passengers get off the bus and they took him away. Since then it's as if the earth had just swallowed him up.

We mothers of the association recount stories like this with a dreadful sorrow in our hearts. We have not been able to stop grieving. And we don't know if we should. We hope to awaken some sensibility in the legitimately constituted authorities, and also in the illegal armed groups, so



that they will shed some light on the matter, will contribute to freeing those taken and, without manipulating the real facts about kidnappings and the forcible disappearance of our relatives, give us proof of their survival, which is the least we can ask.

From this space, as from any other space available to us to express our sorrow, we beg those that are holding them in custody, asking them to imagine themselves in the shoes of the victims and their families. What sadness there is in our lives, how much anguish we suffer, what uncertainty, how many orphaned homes there are, due to a senseless war. And only the innocent victims pay for it all.

But the sorrow of the victims of forced disappearances and kidnappings is not confined to that of the mother or the family which is suffering. It is not just that of anyone in particular. It is not only that of the 58 members of our association. No. It is the entire population which ought to be concerned about freeing the victims. It should be a commitment on the part of all Colombians. And any space for reconciliation that is provided ought to attend to this genuine claim. The damage has not been reserved only for us. The whole of Colombia is sick.

Violence in our country has left many open wounds. As survivors of this harsh experience, and as women who work tirelessly for the freedom of our dear ones, we have the authority to say that the surest path, and also the shortest one, towards taking on the consequences and healing the wounds is the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. A forgiveness which should achieve acceptable levels of truth, justice, and reparation.

If we understand reconciliation in this way, not just as a concept but as a process, we will ensure that the solution to the conflict will not be restricted to just analyzing the problems, but will take up the feeling of the victims in order to facilitate the integration of the sorrowful past with a future of hope. Likewise, the future will be open to the aggressors, or at least to those of them who are willing to assume responsibility and to contribute to the building of a new society which will have as its fundamental basis the rights of the victims and recognition of their dignity.

Since those who have disappeared will always be present in the memory of their families and especially in the hearts of their mothers—in the present tense, not in the past—to let time pass without giving a humble woman a reply to her question about where her son is, or without offering her any proof of his survival, is something that blots out the light of hope and squeezes the woman's heart.

It is a matter of being willing to mitigate that uncertainty, which is what causes us all more and more anguish. ▀