

Colombian gold-mining village fights to stay put

Paul Christopher Webster | Mar. 2, 2012



Bishop Thomas Gumbleton in Marmato, Colombia (Photos by Paul Christopher Webster)

MARMATO, COLOMBIA -- The preparations for the evening Mass on Jan. 15 in the Church of Santa Barbara in Marmato, a mountainside mining village in central Colombia, were ordinary in every detail but one. Shortly before the service began, the village priest, Fr. Carlos Valencia, threaded his way through a tangle of horses and donkey carts into the town square at the wheel of a battered jeep. As he arrived, the bell in the church tower rang out. Inside the brick church, candles were lit as people from the village -- many dressed in colorful handmade clothes, decorative ponchos and heavy leather boots -- gathered beneath rows of brightly glazed ceramic statues of the Virgin and saints. As Valencia commenced the Mass, the only thing out of the ordinary was the presence behind the altar of a bishop from the United States.

The service was well-attended: With only 700 inhabitants, Marmato is a tight-knit place, and the Catholic church has played a vital role ever since the village was founded when Spanish soldiers spotted gold here in 1540. But even though Valencia welcomed the American bishop -- Thomas Gumbleton, who retired after more than 40 years as auxiliary bishop of Detroit -- he offered no explanation for his unusual presence. Perhaps he assumed the villagers had no need for an explanation: In Marmato lately, thanks to a series of highly disruptive conflicts with foreign gold companies who say Marmato sits on gold worth \$10 billion at current prices, unexpected events have become commonplace. Some of these surprises have been extremely unwelcome: Just last September, the congregation of Santa Barbara was shocked to learn that Valencia's predecessor, 36-year-old Fr. José Reinol Restrepo, had been assassinated. And that, as every villager in the church could easily guess, was undoubtedly why the American bishop was in town.

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The basic details surrounding the assassination of Restrepo are by now

well-known in Colombia. On the afternoon of Sept. 2, Restrepo shuttered the church, mounted his small motorcycle and pattered down the unpaved, tortuously steep mountain road past the numerous small gold mines that employ most of the villagers. His plan was to visit family members in a nearby city -- something he was known to do with predictable frequency every week or so. But about an hour into the journey, he was ambushed and shot to death on a lonely stretch of road. His motorcycle was not stolen, nor was the cash in his wallet. "We were extremely shocked," explains Mario Tangarife, a villager who attends services at Santa Barbara with his wife and daughter. "He was a great friend who liked to communicate through jokes and stories. And he was very popular here."

Six months after the murder, no witnesses have spoken publicly, nor have the local police publicly revealed the results of their investigation. In the village, people remain studiously neutral when discussing the murder. But they all agree that Restrepo's death possibly resulted from his very vocal stance against a bitterly divisive proposal to modernize gold extraction in the village. According to this proposal -- now in preparation for government review by a company based in Canada called Gran Colombia Gold Corp. -- Marmato would be obliterated in order to make way for a vast open-pit mine that would allow the company maximum access to what it calls "a world-class ore body" that would be completely mined within a few decades. "The existing town of Marmato will need to be moved and the existing residents re-settled to nearby areas," the company explains. In return for giving up their charmingly historic, albeit ramshackle and polluted town, and control of an ore body they and their forbears have already worked for five centuries, the villagers will get "a planned, modern community" on the plain below the open-pit mine, "with proper streets, sewage, utilities and clean water." The villagers will also be entitled to apply for jobs from Gran Colombia. But under the company's approach, many note, an ore body that will sustain the village's current prosperity for centuries will be exhausted in a matter of at most four or five decades. And that will leave the area with a highly precarious future.

Not surprisingly, many in Marmato view Gran Colombia's resettlement proposal with alarm. And not just because it means the end of a way of life in their region. Displacement of rural people is an agonizingly painful issue throughout Colombia. Across the country, at least 5 million people have been forced from their villages and homes by warfare -- much of it driven by ruthlessly murderous competition for land -- between the Colombian army, political guerrillas and shadowy paramilitary forces that are often associated with local business interests. The Colombian government is currently attempting to return some of this land to those who were displaced at gunpoint, but even as it does so, in the last year 80,000 more people are estimated to have been displaced from their homes in regions wracked by ongoing violence. And these efforts to restore land to displaced people have themselves triggered a new surge in violence: Twenty-one land restitution advocates have been assassinated in the past year.



Mining development is also an increasingly sore issue throughout

Colombia. Under new mining laws crafted with heavy involvement by the government of Canada, the Colombian government is licensing vast swaths of the country to foreign and domestic mining companies. Between 2002 and 2010 areas with mining titles boomed from 2.8 million acres to 21 million acres, and about 40 percent of the country is under consideration for mining projects. Many of the companies that have won titles are structured like Gran Colombia Gold-- which is currently the country's largest underground gold producer and is part of a corporate group that also includes its largest independent oil and gas producer -- and rely on well-connected Colombian executives and access to funding from foreign stock markets. But even though the Colombian government has identified mining development as a primary "economic locomotive," it has largely failed to acknowledge that thousands of small-scale mines employing hundreds of thousands of workers have long been mining the very same deposits that foreign corporations are being promised.

"This is a situation of a sort that is triggering intense conflict and violence throughout the country," Jorge Robledo, a senator, told Gumbleton at a meeting in Bogotá, the Colombian capital. "Marmato is a kind of prototype and should not be developed in this fashion."

When word circulated in the village that Marmato faced the very real threat of a government-backed displacement, Tangarife explained, he and a group of others formed a committee to defend the town. They quickly gathered 500 supportive signatures. Then, late last August, several members of the committee traveled to Bogotá to officially register their views with government officials. Restrepo went with them, and there he bluntly denounced the idea of moving the town and his church in order to make way for a foreign gold corporation. Then, a few days after returning from Bogotá to Marmato, he gave a highly charged television interview in which he said, "If they are going to drive me out of here I would tell them they would have to expel me by way of bullets or machetes -- but they can't oblige me to leave." Four days later, he was murdered.

"I have no idea who killed our priest, and I've seen no evidence that incriminates anyone," said Tangarife, choosing his words with care. "But it does seem a strange coincidence that he was killed just a week after our trip to Bogotá, and just four days after his denunciation of the plan to move Marmato was filmed."

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Colombia has among the world's highest homicide rates. During two decades of vicious civil war driven by political tension between ultraconservatives and liberals, at least 70,000 have been killed. Activists calling for political change of any sort are routinely assassinated, alongside those who may even mildly challenge economic issues such as control of land and resources. Eighty percent of the human rights violations that have occurred in Colombia in the last 10 years were committed in mining and energy-producing regions, and 87 percent of Colombia's displaced population originates from these places, according to Sintraminercol, a Colombian workers' union.



Religious leaders who express political views or criticize economic

policies supported by groups linked to the military, guerrillas or paramilitaries also face extreme danger. Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a UK-based group that tracks attacks on pastors, priests and church leaders, estimates that at least 25 pastors are murdered in Colombia annually. "Entire Christian communities have been displaced," the group noted in a June 2011 report. "Church leaders have been marked for assassination. In many cases these threats have been carried out." Among Catholic clerics, between 1984 and September 2011, two bishops, 79 priests, and three seminarians have been killed, according to the Episcopal Conference of Colombia.

Although the Colombia government recently declared the civil war to be over and 30,000 paramilitary fighters have been disarmed, the United States continues to provide nearly \$700 million in military support annually and many parts of the country continue to suffer from bloodshed. According to the Bogotá-based, Jesuit-founded Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), there were at least 155 political killings during the first six months of 2010 alone. "CINEP considers newly emerged illegal armed groups to be a continuation of supposedly disarmed paramilitary groups and we attribute reports of human rights violations committed by these groups directly to the government," Jesuit Fr. Alejandro Angulo Novoa, the group's research director, told Gumbleton at a meeting in Bogotá. But even though gold-mining communities like Marmato are frequently targeted by guerrilla, paramilitary and armed groups seeking cash, the region around Marmato has been under government control and peaceful for at least a decade, says Yamil Amar, president of the Marmato Defense Committee.

Like his fellow community activist Tangarife, Amar carefully avoids ascribing responsibility for Restrepo's murder to any group or organization. But that doesn't mean the villagers don't harbor suspicions. On the afternoon before Gumbleton concelebrated the Mass at Santa Barbara, in a meeting with the bishop and members of a delegation organized by the Colombia Support Network, a Wisconsin-based group that monitors human rights abuses, Amar explained that miners and activists in Marmato have received veiled warnings not to fight Gran Colombia's proposal to displace the town.

"There is a lot of fear here," Amar told Gumbleton over lunch at Marmato's only restaurant. A large part of that fear stems from Restrepo's murder, Amar explained. "He was killed to frighten people. The message was, 'Go away.'"



Such apprehensions about local factions supportive of Gran Colombia's

proposal -- all of them as yet unsubstantiated by any type of publicly disclosed evidence -- have been

encouraged in part by innuendo and in part by firmer evidence of worries in other parts of the country. Suspicions have been inflamed by the fact that the company's president, Maria Consuelo Araújo, was Colombia's minister for foreign affairs under a Colombian president who headed a party that included dozens of elected members forced out of office and in some cases jailed after their links to paramilitary associations were revealed.

Also speaking to Gumbleton and other members of the Colombia Support Network in Marmato were Martín Muñoz, an organizer with a peasant rights organization in Nariño, a sparsely-populated province in southern Colombia where Gran Colombia has proposed a major gold project, and Dairo Alberto Rúa, president of a union of traditional miners in Segovia, a small city in Antioquia, a province where Gran Colombia has gold operations. Both Muñoz and Rúa suggested that local critics of the company -- including a rural priest -- had received serious threats transmitted through text messages by unidentified parties. They did not allege that Gran Colombia was directly responsible, but instead suggested that local factions supportive of the company may be taking matters into their own hands.

Jesuit Fr. Javier Giraldo, a veteran analyst of Colombian paramilitary activities, has taken a sharper position. He believes there are solid reasons to worry that Restrepo may have been killed in retaliation for his efforts to save Marmato. In a letter written shortly after the murder to Peter McKinley, U.S. ambassador to Colombia, Giraldo argued that the security of foreign resource companies in Colombia "is only effective with the protection of enormous contingents of paramilitaries secretly co-opted by the armed forces and by the government security agencies." Giraldo suggested to the ambassador that, faced with local resistance to resource projects, these paramilitary groups "do not hesitate to murder the leaders of this resistance." The murder of Restrepo, he added, "is one pathetic example of this."



Officials at Gran Colombia describe Restrepo's murder as a tragedy and

they bluntly deny any association with armed forces of any sort. Indeed, in a 2010 statement published in a Colombian newspaper, José Oro, a Gran Colombia vice president, suggested that its critics may themselves be linked to armed groups, including FARC guerrillas: "With the greatest respect," Oro wrote, "I defy any unionist, half mafioso, half FARC, or half paramilitary, to come and tell me if he knows better than I do what is best for the Colombian people. Our work in the social area will be to improve health, clean up the environment -- which has been severely damaged."

At a meeting with Gumbleton and the Colombia Support Network delegation at the Gran Colombia office in Marmato, and in a later meeting in Bogotá at which Amar was also present, company officials went to great lengths to respond to all questions about their project and defend its environmental and economic merits, as well as to explain the company's significant contributions to community development, which include a \$2 million contribution to a new hospital now under construction in the principal area where the company proposes to resettle the inhabitants of Marmato. In a statement released after Restrepo's death, Gran Colombia said it has "commenced working with the [Colombian bishops' conference] to enlist their help in the socialization and proper implementation of the plans for relocating the community." Significant changes were made to Gran Colombia's local security team after Restrepo's murder, according to Luca Altamura, director of sustainability for Gran Colombia, who notes that the local security team structure and rules "and some security staff" were

changed, ?in order to make the community feel better.?

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The administrative complex around Colombia?s presidential palace in Bogotá is one of the highest-security zones on Earth. So it was revealing that Gumbleton and his fellow delegates from the Colombia Support Network were not screened or searched when they came to visit Alma Perez, head of the Colombian government?s Presidential Program on Human Rights. Instead, they were waved through the freshly-restored Spanish colonial complex housing the vice president?s offices into a spacious meeting room where Perez and a pair of human rights lawyers listened carefully to the delegation?s report from Marmato.

?We recognize that communities are facing a serious threat from paramilitary fighters who demobilize and join criminal bands,? Perez said. ?The government has resolved to engage with communities where mining is proposed. I propose we meet next week to start talking about Marmato: Let?s get a dialogue started.?

Because Gran Colombia is registered as a Canadian corporation and relies on a listing on the Toronto stock exchange in order to raise money for its projects, on the last day of his mission to investigate the circumstances of Restrepo?s murder, Gumbleton paid a visit to the Canadian embassy in Bogotá. After Restrepo was murdered, MiningWatch, a Canadian organization that tracks the behavior of mining companies, expressed concern to the embassy that Canadian mining companies ?may well be benefiting from violence.? In a lengthy session with the embassy?s chargé d?affaires, Gumbleton was told that Canadian officials strongly support Gran Colombia?s project and have visited Marmato and observed the use of child labor in its artisanal mines, as well as environmentally dangerous practices. Regarding the murder of Restrepo, Gumbleton was told that both the Canadian government and Gran Colombia have urged Colombian officials to closely investigate the matter.

Canada?s stance regarding Marmato and its \$10 billion patrimony closely matches that of Gran Colombia, Gumbleton said. When he visited the company?s offices in Bogotá before visiting the Canadian embassy, he urged its executives to save the town. Instead of relocating the villagers and bulldozing their homes, Gumbleton suggested the company partner with the government and Marmato?s artisanal miners in modernizing their practices in ways that will sustain their village culture for centuries to come while generating opportunities for Gran Colombia.

?I think that a way can be found to resolve this conflict while saving the town, and without further conflict,? Gumbleton said, ?and that is exactly what I continue to urge the company and the government of Colombia to do.?

[Paul Christopher Webster is a freelance journalist based in Toronto.]

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