

Ricaurte: Shades of the Conflict

Introduction *This Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) Colombia reflection, written by team member Sarah MacDonald in December 2007, is used with permission. In November 2007, CPTers Nils Dybvig and Sarah arrived in Ricaurte, in the province of Narino, for a six-week accompaniment, which followed an initial one earlier in 2007. (CPT is featured in the *Inspirational People* section of Hill Connections.)*

For two weeks I have been living in Ricaurte, in the southwestern province of Narino. My teammate and I came to accompany an indigenous organization, CAMAWARI, or the Council of Elders of the Awa of Ricaurte — Ricaurte being an expansive municipality that includes eleven Awa reservations. Ricaurte is also the name of the town that serves as “head” of the municipality, and this town is home for six weeks to our two-person CPT mobile team.

Before arriving, I had heard that Narino, long a stronghold of guerrilla forces and currently a focused target of national military operations, is one of the deadliest zones in the Colombian conflict. I had read CAMAWARI releases describing how Awa civilians have been assassinated by armed actors, killed by landmines, or forced to displace and then not allowed to return to their lands. Teammates



carefully briefed me on security protocols for living in Ricaurte. So I came expecting to find the situation risky and tense. What I’m experiencing, though, is more nuanced.

Ricaurte is a sleepy little town sloping upward from the highway. The few paved streets and central plaza soon give way to dirt roads and half-hidden neighborhoods, then to rainforested hillside, and occasional shacks. High ridges encircle the town, as if Ricaurte were nestled in a green bowl. Perhaps because daily rains water the earth so well, the surrounding hills glow a brilliant emerald. When I look at them, I think of Eden.

There is a certain Edenic flavor to life here. Or maybe it’s the small-town atmosphere that lulls me into feeling as if living in Ricaurte were gentle and safe. Children play on our street; some now greet me by name. Chickens strut into our yard — and, once, through our open front door. Neighbors bring us gifts of food, then sit and chat for a while. The few times I’ve visited nearby Awa reservations, I’ve found generous spirits and watched shy demeanors break open in joking and laughter. Most days, I can almost forget we’re living in a war zone.



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Except that conversations turn readily to the threats and incidents of violence all too common here: tales of soldiers attacking travelers on the highway or guerrillas burning vehicles, the report of a landmine victim brought into the local hospital with both his feet blown off, warnings to stay out of rural areas, and to avoid traveling at night.

I feel a tension in trying to write about Ricaurte. How do I balance the warmth and welcome with the dangers and griefs? I want to tell you about the violence and human rights abuses — these tragedies are real and need to be known in the wider world. But I also want you to see the view from my window: children running to school, passers-by calling out greetings, Awa people visiting in front of the CAMAWARI office. And in the distance, green hills holding this whole scene: calling us to work and pray for a more just and peaceful world.



Gratitude to CPT for use of their original logo.

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