

Salvador Alcántara

Leading Community's Struggle to Stay on Land in Face of Threats by Drug Traffickers



Conflict and violence have destabilized Colombia for decades and have led to the displacement of millions of people and the killings of thousands of people, including labor and church leaders. Violent oppression of labour unions and the forced displacement of small-scale farmers and miners in order to make way for large-scale agro-industry and multinational mining interests are at the heart of the conflict. The situation is further aggravated by the illegal drug trade, fuelled by demand in the United States, which finances guerrilla groups, paramilitary organizations, and corrupt government, military and police officials.



Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) members accompany — walk with and support — communities in their struggles for violence reduction, self-determination, justice, and peace. In their accompaniment, CPT members meet amazing, courageous people. Following is a CPT story about an inspirational, faith-filled leader in the southern section of Colombia.

A Remarkable Leader

Reverend Salvador Alcántara, from Garzal township of Simití municipality in the southern Bolívar province, Colombia, is a remarkable, exemplary and inspirational man. He is a husband, father, grandfather, pastor of a local church, farmer, president of the Garzal town council, and vice-president of ASPROAS: Association of Alternative Producers of Simití.

That he is able to take on all these tasks and do them well has earned him the respect of both the larger community of Simití and his own smaller community of Garzal. His interpretation of his pastoral duties has led him to become involved in his community's struggle to stay on their lands in the face of constant threats of forced mass displacement.

Loss of Legal Rights and Security

The much-heralded achievements of the Uribe administration — the demobilization of the paramilitaries and the recovery of large tracts of land once controlled by guerrilla groups — have failed to provide residents of Garzal with security. On the contrary: The government has refused to recognize them as the legal owners of the land and instead granted title to these lands to a drug trafficker.

Most residents of Garzal have lived there since the early seventies and should have received squatters' rights after only 5 years of occupation. (See photo essay.)

The title-holder left when his cocaine laboratory was raided in the late 1980s, and he wasn't heard from until 2003, at which time he returned in the company of paramilitaries. He then presented local residents with an ultimatum: Leave or die. Some families fled, and Salvador as the local representative received both offers of bribes and personal death threats. Years later Salvador ran into a now-demobilized paramilitary who expressed shock at seeing Salvador alive:

"I thought you were dead! I had orders to kill you! I knew you were a good man, a man of integrity — and I couldn't carry out those orders — but I thought another one of my colleagues would!"

Respected by His Enemies

It seems that in addition to the respect of his local community and parish, Salvador has also gained

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A Demobilized Paramilitary



Alcántara, a very busy man, as a father, grandfather, farmer, and pastor.

the respect of some of his enemies. Salvador attri-

butes his being alive to God's providence.

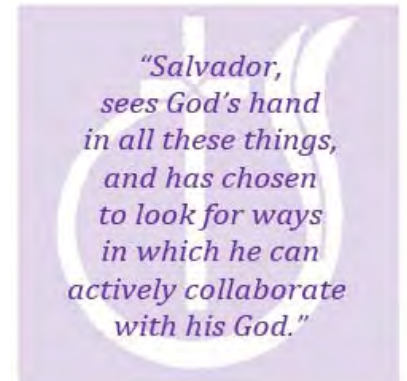
In December of 2008, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) received an accompaniment request — a request for CPT members to be present with, support, and “get-in-the-way” of the violence (CPT mission) — because of fears that a large group of armed men gathering nearby had been contracted to carry out the original death threats. Fortunately the much-feared forced displacement never happened.

Maybe it was because the river had flooded its banks, and the armed group decided to wait for things to dry up a bit; or maybe it was because the military had sent planes to fly over the area and the armed groups dispersed; or maybe it was because the guardian angel God sent to protect Salvador prevented it. Or maybe it was a combination of all of the above.

Faith in God

Salvador sees God's hand in all

these things, and has chosen to look for ways in which he can actively collaborate with his God. He never allows his faith in God to become an excuse for doing nothing. May we all learn from his example!



“Salvador Alcántara” by Stewart Vriesinga in a Feb 2009 e-mail to CPT supporters. Used and modified with permission.
Photos: thanks to Christian Peacemaker Teams.