



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare (ATCC) (Colombia)

(1990)

...for its outstanding commitment to peace, family and community in the midst of the most senseless violence.



Orlando Gaitan & Excelino Ariza

In 1965 Communist guerrillas first established a presence in the Carare region of Colombia. In 1973, when the army came to evict the guerrillas, the opposing armed groups inflicted dreadful violence on the peasants, and in the 1980s this was exacerbated by the presence of paramilitary groups.

By 1987 over 500 peasants had been killed and, in a fateful meeting with military and paramilitary leaders, the peasants were given four options: side with the military, side with the guerrillas, leave the region or die. Those peasants who had sought to stay independent of the violence chose a fifth option: to organise non-violently for peace and development. And so the ATCC was born, with the slogan 'for the right to life, peace and work'.

ATCC's tactics were simple: constant dialogue with all parties (military, paramilitary, guerrillas, government) and an unshakeable commitment to non-violence. They were startlingly successful and only five killings occurred in the region from May 1987 to February 1990, when violence was at a peak for Colombia as a whole. ATCC's peace rally in 1987 attracted 8,000 peasants - two-thirds of all those in the region. In the same year, recognising that peace could not be achieved merely by halting political violence, the Association obtained loans to buy two boats and a grocery store. The shop proved highly successful and was soon providing ATCC with almost its only income.

In 1988 the Association presented its Development Plan to the government, emphasising education, communications systems including roads, peasant and communal organisation and the maintenance of natural resources. This soon began to attract investment from the government's National Plan for Rehabilitation.

Signs of a resurgence of guerrilla activity in 1989 led the ATCC to focus its efforts once again on peace-making. A Peace Forum was organised, bringing together all the protagonists as well as local organisations. Only a month later, however, three of ATCC's leading activists - including its chief spokesmen Miguel Barajas and José Vargas Mateus - were gunned down in their home town of Cimitarra.

The Association immediately called a General Assembly, elected a new Board and determined to pursue dialogue with the armed groups as well as its development projects.

Courage in adversity has been the hallmark of the ATCC.

Quotation

"Instead of accusations and denunciations over the assassination of our leaders, we have intensified our efforts to draw nearer to those who declare themselves our enemies in order to show them that, for us, no one is an enemy, no matter what acts those who wish to destroy us might commit. This is how we conceive peace and this is how we seek to create it."

Excelino Arizam Orlando Gaitán

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