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Peace from Within: Buenaventura Demands a Humanitarian Agreement NOW

Afro-descendant communities on Colombia's Pacific Coast have crafted their own roadmap to defend life and build peace from below.

The morning of November 28, 2021, on the Yurumanguí River in the rural district of Buenaventura marks a day that has still not come to an end. On that day two community leaders were forcibly disappeared: Abencio Caicedo Caicedo, a member of the governing board, and Edinsón Valencia García, coordinator of territorial monitoring and oversight for the Ethnic-Territorial Organization Asociación Popular de Negros Unidos del Río Yurumanguí (APONURY). Their disappearance silenced two steadfast voices in defense of a territory free from industrial mining and illicit crops that poison the land and threaten its collective stewardship.

Faced with the unanswered question—*Where are Abencio and Edinsón?*—the women who gave birth on this land, who watched these men grow into committed community leaders, chose to rise with courage and love. In doing so, they gave life to the collective Mujeres Paridoras y Cuidadoras del Territorio (Women Who Give Birth to and Care for the Territory). Made up of more than 1,700 women, the collective affirms respect for all forms of life. In the face of brutal violence that denies communities the possibility of living with dignity, they have organized to search for the disappeared, shoulder the burden of collective and family mourning, develop protocols to prevent other community members from leaving and



Sunset over Buenaventura Bay on Colombia's Pacific Coast, May 2026. (AUGUSTO GALLO)

never coming back, and protect the children—the seeds that will one day sustain life in the community.

Organizing from a place of grief and hope in a territory where authoritarian control over life is nearly absolute is itself an act of courage, for such action can turn these women into military targets. Yet in exercising their rights to self-determination and collective organization, they place justice above fear, convinced that wherever there is a woman searching for the disappeared, the hope of building peace endures.

Afro-descendant communities are not merely victims of war, but political actors capable of advancing concrete alternatives to protect life and build peace from the territories.

The disappearance of Abencio and Edinson, together with the deepening humanitarian crisis in Buenaventura, reinforced the conviction that communities needed to develop their own proposal to defend life. From that process emerged the *Acuerdo Humanitario YA* (Humanitarian Agreement NOW), a peace initiative built from within that brings together the demands and humanitarian minimums defined by those who inhabit and care for the territory. At a time when official peace negotiations have yielded few tangible results, the proposal demonstrates that Afro-descendant communities are not merely victims of war, but political actors capable of advancing concrete alternatives to protect life and build peace from the territories.

Buenaventura in the Face of Permanent War

Buenaventura is a special ethnically designated district on Colombia's Pacific Coast, administratively part of the department of Valle del Cauca. Its territory is shaped by the watersheds of the Yurumanguí, Naya, Cajambre, Mayorquín, Raposo, Anchicayá, Dagua, Bahía Málaga, and Calima rivers. For more

than three decades, its people have endured a war they did not choose, one fueled by the territory's geostrategic location.

For Buenaventura's organized communities, President Gustavo Petro's proposal of "Total Peace" arrived as a kind of utopia. How could we not allow ourselves, once again, to believe that the fundamental right to peace, held hostage for more than three decades, might finally be realized? No more communities under forced confinement. No more recruitment.

No more displacement. In theory, Total Peace moved beyond the fragmented peace policies pursued by previous governments by opening bilateral negotiations with all recognized illegal armed groups operating in the territory.

Yet the gap between Petro's promise and Buenaventura's reality remains vast. Today, at least six

illegal armed organizations operate in the territory alongside the Colombian security forces: the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Second Marquetalia, the Jaime Martínez Mobile Column, the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC), and the urban gangs known as the Shottas and the Espartanos. Each one vies for control of the strategic corridors linking Buenaventura to Colombia's interior, to international river routes, to mechanized mining zones, and territories where illicit crops are cultivated.

Rural communities in Buenaventura, whose collective ethnic and territorial rights were recognized more than 30 years ago under Law 70 of 1993, have found themselves caught in the crossfire, targeted by multiple armed groups. In February 2023, despite a declared ceasefire, the Jaime Martínez Mobile Column established an illegal checkpoint along the Raposo and Yurumanguí rivers, restricting the movement of more than 2,000 people. Rather than bringing relief, the ceasefire allowed armed groups to further consolidate their territorial control.

But if blood rains down in Buenaventura's rural areas, the storm never lets up in the city. The Shottas

and Espartanos—successors to the paramilitary structures of the 1990s—control 80 percent of Buenaventura's 136 neighborhoods. They impose curfews, recruit children and youth, and extort residents for virtually every aspect of daily life: repairing or expanding a home, operating a business, buying a car, selling goods informally, not raping girls. Not even educational institutions are spared. The result has been the normalization of extreme violence, as armed conflict has seeped into every aspect of daily life: into homes, intimate relationships, schools, and child-care centers. Nothing escapes the violent, decaying regime of domination imposed over life by these agents of evil.

Across Colombia's Pacific Coast, a slow-moving ethnic extermination is unfolding through the selective and systematic killing of Afro-descendant youth. The Afro Watch Observatory of the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN, Black Communities Process) —one of Colombia's largest Afro-descendant social movements—has named this phenomenon Afrojuenicide: the targeted extermination of Afro-descendant young people between the ages of 13 and 30 as a mechanism of ethno-racial demographic control. In its 2024 annual human rights report, *Watching Over the Path of Dignity: The Traces of Afrojuenicide*, the Observatory argues that naming the phenomenon is necessary to expose the racialized nature of violence that official accounts intentionally erase by presenting homogenized statistics. Since 2018, the Observatory has documented more than 4,000 murders and enforced disappearances of Afro-descendant youth between the ages of 13 and 30. Buenaventura also records the highest annual number of killings of Afro-descendant youth among Colombia's majority-Black municipalities. Despite significant underreporting, these figures reveal that the very continuity of Black and Afro-Colombian communities is at grave risk.

The violence inflicted on Buenaventura does more than kill and dispossess families. It also seeks to strip Afro-descendant peoples of their memory and collective identity. Violence in Colombia suppresses cultural



"We want to return to our community with the minimum rights that we deserve, the Calima community." A demonstration against violence in Buenaventura in May 2026. (COURTESY OF PROCESO DE COMUNIDADES NEGRAS EN COLOMBIA)

expression in all its forms: it shuts down autonomous community organizations, silences social leaders, and curtails rights won through decades of social struggle. In doing so, it robs communities not only of political tools but also of their capacity for autonomy—that fundamental condition that allows a people to make decisions about their collective future. The restrictions imposed by armed groups function as mechanisms of ethno-demographic, social, and political control, limiting the exercise of territorial rights secured more than 30 years ago.

Amid this bleak landscape, on July 18, 2023, the Colombian government established a Socio-Legal Dialogue Process with the Shottas and Espartanos, aimed at advancing the voluntary, coordinated, and negotiated dismantling of these armed groups. Three years later, however, progress has been minimal. Extortion continues unabated, local commerce

remains constrained, and the ceasefire has proven unsustainable. Mario Angulo Sanclemente, the PCN's regional coordinator, warns that "to date, there has been no structural transformation of the armed conflict in Buenaventura." He also points to the disconnect between what is negotiated at the dialogue tables and the ongoing brutality that continues to mark both bodies and territories.

Buenaventura also has its own history of broken local agreements. In 2017, a 22-day Civic Strike brought the city to a standstill as residents mobilized to demand investment in basic services, public infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other long-neglected rights. The strike secured 117 commitments with the Colombian government, including the creation of FonBuenaventura, a special fund established to finance the implementation of those commitments and address the city's historic social and economic marginalization. Yet nine years later, according to the Civic Strike Committee, only 7 percent of those commitments have been fulfilled, leaving many of the fundamental rights they sought to guarantee still unmet. Human rights defenders therefore feared that Total Peace would produce much the same result: a state apparatus that absorbs communities' organizational energy into dialogue tables, committees, and oversight mechanisms without transforming the material conditions of violence and inequality they continue to face.

A Community-Led Vision for Life

Long before the Colombian government launched its Total Peace negotiations, organized communities in Buenaventura had already begun crafting their own responses. By late 2021, escalating battles among illegal armed groups for control of mechanized gold mining, drug trafficking, and other illicit economies—in addition to rising extortion, displacement, confinement, coercion, environmental destruction, and the enforced disappearance of community leaders,

including Abencio and Edinson, in the Yurumanguí River basin—had prompted the PCN to deepen its efforts to build community resilience and ensure that Afro-descendant communities could remain in their territories.

Together with the Community Councils of the Calima, Dagua, Anchicayá, Mayorquín, Raposo, Yurumanguí, and La Plata–Bahía Málaga river basins, as well as the Association of Reclaimed Coastal Lands, the PCN developed the Humanitarian Agreement NOW: a collective, community-led proposal for peace built from within, by and for those living the violence firsthand.

A series of *Encuentros Humanitarios* or Humanitarian Gatherings have been among the initiative's most powerful tools for documenting the humanitarian crisis and collectively shaping the Humanitarian

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Agreement NOW. Organized under the slogan, "*Cam-inamos los territorios para construir la vida*" ("We walk our territories to build life"), these gatherings created spaces for communities to document forced confinement, food insecurity, the recruitment of children, and other violations of international humanitarian law. The testimonies and cases collected became the foundation for the contextual analysis underpinning the proposal.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Community Councils and Ethno-Territorial Organizations affiliated with the PCN and the National Afro-Colombian Peace Council (CONPA) convened 10 territorial assemblies to weave together the demands emerging from their territories. The proposals generated through those dialogues were documented, systematized, and ultimately ratified at a community assembly in 2023. The result was the Humanitarian Agreement NOW: a

collectively developed alternative to war, conceived, debated, and advanced from the banks of the rural territories contested today by armed groups and the forces of extractive capital.

Rather than waiting for national peace negotiations to resolve their crisis, these organizations have charted their own path. Drawing on a community-led assessment of the armed conflict's impact on daily life, they have called for a territorial dialogue process involving armed groups, the Public Ministry, the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, the United Nations, the Organization of American States' Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OAS), and Colombia's Vice Presidency. Their proposal also lays out a concrete roadmap: ten community meetings in rural areas, two rounds of dialogue with each

armed group, the strengthening of 150 village-level committees, and the construction of 11 community shelters to mitigate forced displacement. At the same time, it calls on all armed actors to uphold a set of immediate humanitarian minimums while negotiations toward a lasting peace continue.

These include guaranteeing communities' freedom of movement and access to food; respecting ethnic authorities and systems of self-government; ending the recruitment of children; protecting community spaces—including schools, cultural centers, meeting halls, neighborhood gathering places, sports fields, and political spaces such as assemblies and patron saint celebrations; respecting sexual and gender diversity; ending economic activities that destroy the harmony of the territory, including mechanized



Community members gather at the Calima Community Council in Buenaventura for a territorial meeting on the Humanitarian Agreement in 2025. (COURTESY OF PROCESO DE COMUNIDADES NEGRAS EN COLOMBIA)



Members of the Black Communities Process (PCN) march in Buenaventura on International Workers' Day, May 1, 2026. (COURTESY OF PROCESO DE COMUNIDADES NEGRAS EN COLOMBIA)

mining with excavators; allowing communities to carry out funeral rites, including burials, novenas, wakes, and *última noche* ceremonies; and ending the illegal taxes imposed on community construction projects. To date, the Colombian state has yet to respond to these demands.

These agreements establish the concrete conditions necessary for community life to endure. They reaffirm that Afro-descendant communities are not merely passive victims of war but political actors with the intellectual, organizational, and territorial capacity to articulate their own alternatives in the midst of armed conflict. In doing so, they place their aspiration to realize the fundamental right to peace above fear, terror, and despair.

The war being waged today in Buenaventura and Colombia's Pacific Coast is every bit as brutal, systematic, and devastating as the conflicts that dominate international headlines: the bombardment of Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, and the massacres in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. What distinguishes this conflict is not the scale of its horror but

its normalization—and the indifference shown toward the suffering of Buenaventura's people. It reveals a world in which some lives are deemed more valuable than others, where the lives of Afro-Colombians remain expendable to the political elites who wield the power to administer justice and social protection.

By advancing and sustaining the Humanitarian Agreement NOW, Buenaventura's communities have charted their own course for defending life and building peace in their territories. Today, their proposal stands as one of the most concrete and compelling paths toward a just and lasting peace in Buenaventura and across Colombia's Pacific Coast. **n**

Translated from Spanish by NACLA.

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