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Colombia War Spills Into Indians' Peaceful World

By [JUAN FORERO](#)

TACUEYÓ, Colombia, April 28 - The Nasa Indians appear to live well on their lush reservation here in southern Colombia, a swath of mountains and valleys where sweet fruit grows, trout teem in fast-flowing creeks and colorful birds dart about.

They live in tidy, well-kept homes, growing coffee, bananas and beans. Emphasizing economic independence, they run a successful fish farm and are trying to strike up a marble mine.

The one major threat to their existence is Colombia's unrelenting civil conflict, which has ground on for 41 years. But the Nasa, an Indian nation that numbers about 100,000 in this region, has used a pacific civil resistance campaign to stay out of the drug-fueled war, which pits the army and right-wing paramilitaries against Marxist rebels intent on toppling the state.

For four years, the Nasa's stern-faced but unarmed Indigenous Guards - now a force of 7,000 men and women - have simply driven away the fighters who venture into these fog-shrouded mountains in Cauca Province. They confront rebel and soldier alike with ceremonial three-foot batons decorated with tassels in the colors of the Nasa flag, green and red, and persuade the outsiders to leave.

Their success has earned the acclaim of the United Nations and the foreign governments that pay for Nasa development programs.

The Indians have forced traffickers to close down cocaine-producing labs. They have faced down paramilitary death squads. When the mayor of the Nasa town of Toribio was kidnapped by guerrillas last year, 400 guards marched two weeks over the Andes to the rebel camp where he was being held. They won his release.

"We do not want armed groups on our land," said Julio Mesa, 57, the leader of the Indigenous Guards in Tacueyó. "So what we do is we get people together and get them out."

But in the last two weeks, brutal fighting has swept into three of the Nasa's eight towns, testing the Indians' pacifism and autonomy.

Starting on April 14, the rebels began rocket attacks on Toribio. In nine days of fighting, a 9-year-old boy and several policemen and soldiers were killed. The government took back the town, but rebels pounded another community, Jambaló, with their notoriously inaccurate mortars, propane tanks armed with explosives.

Tacueyó was next.

On Wednesday, with a Colombian military plane raining down bullets on rebel positions, dozens of

young soldiers supported by light tanks and armored vehicles stormed Tacueyó. The rebels responded by firing nearly a dozen of the makeshift mortars. Soldiers answered back with their mounted machine guns from the central square.

"What worries me are the sharpshooters," said one baby-faced soldier, Andrés Nova, 24, as he squeezed up against a wall for protection. "They are not that good, but anyone with a rifle is a danger."

Shortly after, snipers killed a soldier and wounded two others.

Tacueyó's Indians were caught in the middle. When a rebel rocket landed on a house, severely injuring two children, Mr. Mesa and others ran to help. They looked stunned and helpless.

Mr. Mesa, 57, and his wife, María, 54, also a member of the guard, had spoken to the rebels early on. "They said, 'We're at war,' " Mr. Mesa recounted. "There was nothing more to say, so I left. But first I told them, 'What you're doing is very bad.' "

Across Colombia, dozens of Indian tribes are being hammered by the war. Assassins single out leaders of the Wayuú in northeastern Colombia. In northwestern Choco State, Embera children, whipsawed by war and poverty, have committed suicide. Nationwide, tens of thousands of Indians have become refugees. Some of the smaller tribes, the United Nations recently warned, are on the verge of disappearing.

Mr. Mesa and other Nasa leaders are determined to see their nation avoid that fate.

The Nasa, also known here as the Páez, were not always peaceful. In the 1980's, they formed a fighting group, Quintin Lame, but the violence only escalated. The Indians changed tactics, and vowed to stay out of the fighting. They focused on building a self-sustaining community held together by an overarching philosophy of self-determination and the right to be left alone.

"The government wants to involve us, in their army, in the police, in their informants network," explained Nelson Lemus, an Indian leader. "The guerrillas, they want us to get involved in the revolutionary story, the fight for power."

But "getting involved in war," he said, "hurts our culture, our language, our ways."

As Mr. Mesa spoke about the Nasa's efforts to keep the peace, a sniper's bullet came close and the Indian leader and other guards hit the ground.

"We want to talk, to see if they will listen," Mr. Mesa said, lifting his short, bulky frame off the ground and dusting himself off after the shooting ended. "Sometimes they do listen to us, but lots of time, they do not."

For the army, whose commanders met with the Indians throughout the ordeal, there could be no withdrawal, though Col. Juan Trujillo said he understood the Nasa's position. But he said it was the army's job to fight off the rebels. "We are the state here," he said.

Still, Mr. Mesa was not about to give up. Last Thursday, he calmly trudged across Tacueyó, wearing a farmer's hat and carrying his trusty baton, and generally oblivious to the shooting around him. What he faced, though, was at times heartbreaking. A 2-week-old girl had died; villagers debated whether the missiles and bullets that had raked the fields near her home were to blame.

But not all the news was bad. When townspeople became concerned that light tanks were being positioned too close to where most villagers had escaped, Mr. Mesa was able to get a tank commander to hold off.

And when a young man was detained by soldiers, suspected of helping the rebels, Mr. Mesa was able to get the army to turn him over.

"You see," Mr. Mesa said, leading him away. "Talking is the best way to resolve things."

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