

# INTERVIEW WITH AN ASSASSIN

**T**he following interview was conducted by photojournalist Jason P. Howe in July 2003 in southern Colombia. The interviewee, who we have named Lorena, requested that her exact location and true identity not be revealed. Lorena, 23, lives with her four-year-old daughter in Colombia's Amazon region. She has been a member of the

right-wing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), for two and a half years. The AUC control the town where she lives and several villages in the area. Most of the region's other towns and villages have been controlled by the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) for decades.

Paramilitaries moved south into Lorena's region in the late 1990s, intent on seizing rebel-controlled territory—particularly valuable coca-producing areas. By the end of 2001, after perpetrating several massacres, paramilitaries established a prominent presence in numerous towns throughout the region. The U.S.-backed Colombian Army colluded with the paramilitaries during this offensive.

Also in 2001, there was a change in paramilitary tactics. Instead of large-scale massacres, they began selectively assassinating people whose names appeared on death lists, often provided by rebel deserters or military intelligence. AUC leader



Lorena checks her handgun as her daughter and nieces play on the bed.

Carlos Castaño devised this new strategy to avoid the negative publicity generated by massacres. It was with this tactical shift that Lorena went from being a paramilitary soldier to an assassin.

Meanwhile, local peasants and townsfolk continue to live their lives amid the violence. And turning to the only viable economic opportunity in the region—coca growing—has further drawn the rural population of southern Colombia into the conflict. Local residents caught in the crossfire have few options: endure the violence, flee the violence or join the violence.

In a region where respect is only afforded at gunpoint, the rebels and paramilitaries swell their ranks with youths, like Lorena, eager to support and empower themselves. Many of these young people have lived their entire lives in the midst of a conflict whose principal victim has been the civilian population. Lorena is a tragic and extreme example of how the systemic violence perpetrated by the guerrillas, the paramilitaries and the Colombian Army adversely affects Colombia's rural youth.

*How many years have you been with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)?*

Two and a half years. I have known the AUC since they arrived in this area, but I have only worked with them for two and a half years.

*What are the AUC fighting for?*

More than anything, the fight here is for money and that comes from coca. The group with the most money and people will be the strongest. The AUC is financed by coca and so is the FARC. As a result, there is fighting to take over towns and to control the people and the money. There is lots of combat and many deaths. That's the motive—coca and money.

*Why are you working with the AUC and not the FARC?*

I don't know. I feel that I like the AUC and the FARC live mainly in the jungle, although there are a lot of women on the side of the FARC. But the life of the guerrillas is more difficult. It's more difficult because they cannot come to the villages; they have to stay in the mountains. The army and the AUC are always after them.

*So if the FARC were stronger and the life was easier, would you fight for them?*

If it could be vice versa? I don't know. The people have never liked the guerrillas because of the extortion.

*Are the paramilitaries fighting against the government?*

Against the government? No.

*Jason P. Howe is a photojournalist who has worked extensively in Colombia. His work is online and can be viewed at <[www.conflictpics.co.uk](http://www.conflictpics.co.uk)>.*

The AUC and the army are both fighting against the FARC. They say they fight each other and they have had some encounters, but only when troops are lost. But usually we coordinate with them because we have the same cause.

*Do the AUC receive any information or help from the army?*

Yes. Depending on where we are fighting, we receive assistance. They send helicopters, but only sometimes.

*How did you first make contact with the AUC?*

They arrived in numbers on the river. At first, people were scared because they thought the paramilitaries had arrived to kill whomever. But then I made friends with some of the guys. They spoke very well, treated people well and were very proud. Then I became a friend of the commander. They needed collaboration from the people in the villages, so I told them who were guerrillas and who weren't and other things. So when I met the AUC, I left my studies to join them. I entered their training school.

*The [Colombian] army's school?*

No, the AUC schools are run by people who have left or are retired from the army. It's tough training, like in the army, and if you don't pass the training you are killed. The first thing you learn is how to handle 7.62 and 5.56 mm weapons.

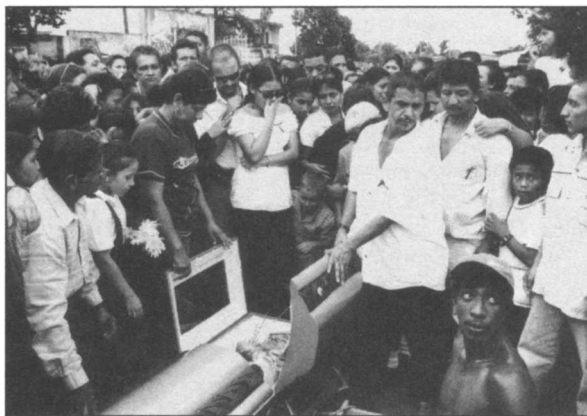
*Why did you join the AUC?*

I simply joined to see if I had the capacity to kill someone. More than anything else, that's why I joined the AUC. I also wanted to learn how they lived. Living and sleeping in the jungle away from home.... Sometimes you have a great time...

and people respect you when you are in camouflage and have your rifle. Whereas, when you are here [as a civilian] there is no respect. But in the jungle, they respect you for what you have on. They are afraid of you because they know if they raise their voice at you or do something you don't like, you may shoot them, kill them or something like that.

*Do you think fear is the same as respect?*

For the civilians? Yes. They have fear and at the same time they have respect, because we are in control. Everybody is distinguished by their rank. We have commanders, financiers and patrollers.



*The coffin of an assassinated teacher is opened for the family to say their farewells.*

*In some other societies people are respected for being kind or generous, but here people respect you because you have a bigger gun. Do you think that is sad?*

Well yes, because they know that if they offend the person with the gun they can be killed. Because [the paramilitaries] don't care about killing a person, it doesn't bother them. They don't feel the pain of others. They just want respect. Yes, it's always sad. How can it not be sad? There's pain. But you are yourself or nobody, and you want respect.

*Have you been in combat?*

Yes, I was in combat twice. Once

when [the FARC] killed 28 of my companions including a woman and another time when they killed 15. After that I took a break. Now I am working with the urban militia.

*How was your first time in combat?*

I was nervous, but my companions gave me a lot of support. They told me we have to press forward, that we have to kill them or they will kill us. It's my life or theirs. We have to defend ourselves. That's what we learned during the three months of training school. They trained us very well.

*Was your second time in combat much easier?*

Sure, the second time it was very easy, I was not scared or nervous. With time, you know how to move. Only, you don't know where the first shot is coming from. Once you are in position it's O.K., you are not nervous, you're just shooting ahead.

*And now you work for the AUC in what way?*

Right now, I don't really get involved. I just collaborate. I am from here and if I leave the organization, [the AUC] will kill me. I have to speak with the bosses and they use me sometimes when they need to kill someone or investigate people or take people from the village.

*How many people are killed in this town?*

Right now there aren't many deaths, an average of three or four a day. But when there are many killings, it's like five or seven.

*How many people have you killed?*

In total, I have killed 23 people with my own hands.

*How did you feel when you killed the first person?*

When I killed the first person, I was afraid, I was scared. I killed the first person just to see if I could. But there is an obligation to kill. If you don't, they kill you. That's why the first was very hard, because the person I killed was kneeling down begging not to be killed. The person was crying, saying, "Don't kill me. I have children." That's why it was difficult and sad. If you don't kill that person, someone else from the AUC will come to kill you. So in that case, you must kill to not be killed. After the killing you keep trembling. You can't eat or talk to anyone. I was at home, but I kept imagining the person begging not to be killed. I shut myself inside, but with time I forgot everything. The superiors always say, "Don't worry, that was just the first time. When you kill the second one, it will all be O.K." But you keep trembling.

*Was the second time much easier?*

The second time is only a bit easier, but as they say here, "If you can kill one, you can kill many more." You have to lose the fear. Now I am still killing and nothing happens. I feel normal. Before I had an obligation to kill, I was sent to kill. But once I left the organization I was not obligated. I only do the job for money. Now I get paid per job. With them I was paid monthly; it didn't matter how many I killed. But now when I do a job, I get paid cash. It doesn't matter what the problem is. When they pay me and tell me to kill, that's what I do.

*So the reality of the situation is that now you kill for cash?*

Yes. If someone gives me enough money to kill someone, I do it. Mainly it is women who pay. Why? Because they are jealous that their husband is seeing someone else.

*How do you kill?*

I use a gun. I take a motorbike and I go to see the target and I shoot them in the head, and then I leave. Sometimes I use a knife, but with a knife it's more difficult because you need more strength and so you need others to help. So, it is much easier to put a bullet in the head.

*How much money do you get paid?*

The maximum I get is US\$500, but it's always more than US\$300.

*Have you killed people you know?*

Yes, I've known them. More than anything they were friends. But I did it because the people who ordered me to kill had investigated them a lot.

*You have killed your friends?*

Yes, because in one situation they were going to kill me. They told me to take care because they worked for the other side and had connections with the guerrillas. And so it was my life or theirs. So I asked permission to do it, which [the AUC] gave me. [The AUC] investigated and it came out positive that [my friends] worked for the guerrillas, so I killed them. It was very painful for me [to kill one friend]. I was at the burial and at the vigil. It hurt me to see his mother crying, knowing I was the one guilty of having caused that. That was very painful. But it's your life and you're taught in the school: First you, then the others.

*If anyone in your family were with the guerrillas, would you kill him or her?*

If anyone in my family were with the guerrillas? I don't know how to answer. But I believe yes, if they had the capacity to kill, even though they are family. You learn that nothing in this life is certain.

*So nobody's life is more important than yours?*

My life, my parents, my daughter and close family are very important. But the distant family, like cousins, nieces, if they were on the other side? No, because they would kill me.

*What does your family say about your work?*

Well, my family, they advise me not to do this. They ask me if I regret what I have done. My mother and father; but more my mother. She gives me a lot of advice because it hurts her that I am like this. But after a while I get annoyed with her and say it is my life and this is the way I am and will be.

*Do you think more violence in this country is the solution? For example, do you think your work helps the situation?*

I help people, and those people have no more problems with their husbands. And in my case, I am O.K., because I get paid. The situation in Colombia is extreme, and Colombia is one of the most violent countries. I don't think that this situation will be solved.

*If you had the same opportunities again, what would you do? With everything you know now, would you do the same things?*

Maybe not. Maybe I don't want to continue with this life. Maybe I want to put it to one side, but I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no. I want to change my life. Right now I'm tired, and it hurts to have killed so many people. Before I was obligated, but now it's just for money, and the money is everything. But I'd like to get out of here and go somewhere else, have good work and make progress. Because I reached the 11th grade, I can go to the university and carry on studying. I don't know. ■