

## MARTA

In the month of May there was a horrible massacre. They took more than 150 people from a nearby town. They killed six of them and two disappeared. It was a hellish day, horrifying, the kind that just puts you up against the wall. They had planned to kill many more, and we thought the death toll was much greater, but it stopped there because we were able to get the authorities to show up in time.

I said to myself, “Look, Marta, you are the representative of this place. They are killing your people. What are you going to do?”

We started to see how close the armed actors were because we were saying: “We have to talk to them! Let them look us in the face and tell us how they can kill our people.” Then in August there were more killings, this time selective. Young people, young people. That’s what hurts me the most, that they kill our young. They aren’t giving them a chance. A young drug addict is a young person who will die. They just killed one of our young, who was 12 years old. We had been battling to help him. We had taken him to a rehabilitation center, then we brought him here, sat him down and told him to write. We weren’t able to prevent it. They killed him in a brutal way. They stabbed him 140 times. That’s what revenge is like!

Then, along with the mayor, with the priest—who is a leader of the regional municipality—and with an alderman, we started to look for humanitarian approaches. First we tried with the paramilitaries of this area. Very difficult. A very closed man, very ignorant; he won’t even look you in the eye. To the point where I, who was the first to speak, to begin the dialogue, didn’t want to talk because the man wouldn’t look at us. I’m not going to talk to this guy who won’t look me in the face, I have nothing to say to him. We never really connected with that man, I didn’t connect. I swear I did everything possible, I tried to find the way, I did... but no. It was very difficult.

Then we sought out the commander of the guerrillas. It's true that I had my guard up, because a car bomb had just been set off and we had been told they had done it. I was also told that he always had his face covered and I am afraid when people won't show me their faces. When we got there I was surprised to find the man had his face completely uncovered. And we were able to talk with him looking him straight in the face, which took away his revolutionary aspect, making him much more human. That meeting was very fruitful, at least for me it was quite enriching. I had never before had an armed actor in front of me, someone who you know with all certainty could pick up a gun and kill someone, who commits the atrocities he commits. It's a great thing to have someone like that before you and to be able to discover the human aspect in him. In the final analysis, when you disrobe someone like that completely, what you have left is his identity as a human being.

I mean, guerrillas come in white, black, yellow. You can be the worst paramilitary, the most convinced socialist, the most convinced democrat, the most convinced citizen. But in the end all these differences take second place to the human being that's there and who makes faces like you and me, laughs like you and me, moves his hands, that is... it was very moving for me to see the guerrilla commander himself being moved. I talked about a person who was very important to us, who had been killed in the war. I said: "You need to respect us because we have given you our leaders. And our leaders gave their lives up front. They never placed a car bomb, never placed a rocket, never took up arms. They allowed themselves to be put in jail and then they were killed." I came away very convinced that that's what we needed to keep doing.

Then we were threatened by some paramilitary actors here, at the urban level; because we were trying to close the brothels and that was awful. They threatened us. We met again with a paramilitary group, this time very locally. There were two paramilitaries. One was the boss, a young man about 28 or 29

years old, and a young man about 20, beautiful, beautiful, well dressed, he caught one's eye. We arrived to speak with them and the boss was absolutely cynical. I said to him, "God, what is this? We've suffered 28 deaths in a month, selective deaths, 28 young people. What do you say to that?" To which he responded, "I take responsibility for it and it's just beginning."

I went crazy and said to him, "You must not have had a mother to teach you Christian morals, about respecting life. You were never loved, what kind of person are you..." And I started to lecture him and I went on and on and on, and I didn't even stop to take a drink of water and the priest tried to give me some and I wouldn't even take a drink of water, I talked, I talked, I talked. I told that boss: "Look, I'm going to keep doing my job till the last day and up to the last hour I'll be against you. If I'm a threat to you, just say so and I'll go. Give me that opportunity, don't just kill me." I could see that that boy wasn't moved, but the other kid was moved, his eyes filled up with tears, he was looking at me as if he were... good. And I said to myself, "At least I've accomplished something with this one."

We left there. Apparently the boss guy said, "this idiot woman giving us lessons on humanism," but the other kid came to seek me out. I was very frightened and I said to myself, "Naturally, he'll be coming to threaten me, to tell me to go." But I sat right here at my desk, he sat on the other side, and he started to wring his hands nervously, and so did I. So I looked at him and I just said, "Andres, do your job." And he said to me, "You are afraid of me, Madame Representative. Why are you afraid? I'm not a dog." When he told me that he lost it, he was clearly moved, and so was I. So I went to him and took his hands and said, "You are a human being like I am, if I haven't done anything to you, you haven't done anything to me." He said to me, "I'm here because you have moved me like no one else ever has, because I want you to help me, because you are the most wonderful human being I have ever met." Well, in short, I tried to help him in every way I could. There is no re-insertion for paramilitaries.

The next step we took was to go with a group of mayors to seek out the supreme commander of the self-protection league. At the appointed place, the paramilitaries detained us, separating us from the mayors. We insisted on talking with the commander but they said it was impossible. Nonetheless, a few hours later we were told: "You are in luck, the commander is going to come to talk with you." And he came, with his unmistakable voice, his unmistakable figure, immediately recognizable, supremely courteous, supremely respectful. He said to us, "I very much regret your circumstances." I said to him, "Commander, what are our circumstances? No one has told us." "You have been detained by the self-defense league."  
"You have kidnapped us?"  
"Yes, lady, you are kidnapped."

We talked with him at length. He scolded us for our humanitarian approaches. I asked him to act in good faith, told him it wasn't true what he was saying, that the mayors, at least, were supporters of the guerrillas. "Their approach was closer to that of the guerrillas', not the citizenry's". Well... we tried to insist that it wasn't all true, that the mayors were only interested in attending to the needs of their populace. We spoke with him a good while and he was very nice. At one moment, when we were talking about people we knew, he put his hands on his head and said, "My God! In this war one ends up almost kidnapping his own family." We spoke for a while about his children and about someone in my family that he knew.

I said to him, "Commander, it really doesn't bother me to be kidnapped, if it means you giving me the opportunity to speak to you as a human being, to tell you how I feel as a local authority, what the mayors feel, what we all feel when we have to gather our dead, when we have to bury them because they left nothing. When we have to give food, shelter and clothing to the orphans, to the widows, to the parents who were supported by their sons. I want to tell you how I

feel. I also want to tell you how we feel when the guerrillas place a car bomb, I mean, what we feel as citizens in the face of this war you are waging. Give me that opportunity.”

The next day we met with the mayors and we had the opportunity to speak at length, a long while, and to see the radical change in that commander, energetic, very hard, never rude, never disrespectful but with his perspective so far right you can't even imagine, barbarous. The mayors said to him, “:You see, we... what do we feel? What do we feel when you kill our people? Etc.” And he was going from practically saying, “You are the auxiliaries of the guerrillas” to saying at the end “You have to keep on, you are very brave, I in your shoes would do the same, you have to keep making yourselves heard, you have to participate in the dialogues of el Caguan.”

He heard me say to him: “You don't deserve the luxury of detaining us here, of calling us guerrillas or auxiliaries of the guerrillas because, no. We defend the State, which is imperfect, it's true, it's full of errors, but we defend it. We defend the institution because we are representatives of the State. Not so much me as the mayor. I consider myself more a representative of the citizenry, of society, but to a certain degree I support the State. I defend it. And that discourse has allowed me... I feel it has allowed the mayors to respect us. We come saying, “We are the State, yes. We defend the State, not your right wing, which isn't going to lead to anything, nor the left wing. We are the State. Because the State is everyone. We are all defenders of the institution and we are here to correct, to try to correct, its errors. We defend life...”

At first they would censure us when we would say we were neutral, that we were involved in neutral activity. They would get furious. Neither the Colombian army nor the guerrillas nor the paramilitaries tolerate neutrality. They say: you have to be with us, or you're with them, naturally. We changed that discourse.

