

ENRIQUE

To my way of thinking, you get armed violence when you try to defend the collective interests of the people—very communal, very humane interests—from groups of people who export war to impose their own interests. In the long run, though, the remedy is worse than the illness, which is what we are living with now.

Our approach has three components:

The first is to appeal to the human side, the rational side of the armed actors themselves. We have no choice but to try to connect with their rational being, as well as their emotional being, so that they will let us live as a part of the conflict. We always say we are part of the conflict as an unarmed population fighting for certain interests. Therefore, we ask that the armed actors respect this other faction which we are. We defend our interests, not through armed conflict, but in other ways.

At the same time we are always working out details with them. For example, we say to them, “Give us ideas about how to get food through, how to get medicines through, so that innocent people aren’t falling under fire, so that the people don’t have to be so on the move.” In other words, always trying to defend our interests and at the same time extend a helping hand. “Don’t look at us as the enemy, we aren’t your enemies. But don’t tag us as your friends either, or the enemies of the other camp, or vice versa. We think of ourselves as your quote-unquote ‘friends’ to mediate and to work with you, but on civic or community issues aimed at designing a better life for you, which we hope will not be violent or armed.”

We believe that those who have taken up arms are also part of the community, because they are there and we have to share our day-to-day life with them. We

value greatly something we've been calling from the beginning "humanitarian approaches." We've been doing that since 1996, when the President of the Republic, the State, didn't allow it. In practice it's always been that way, and I'll tell you why.

An armed group arrives at a family's house, the man of the house gets up his courage and goes to them and says, "Hey, you all are placing my family in danger. Why don't you move on just a bit and we won't be in such danger?" That's a humanitarian approach.

Or the person from the town goes looking for two or three other neighbors and together they find the courage to go and say to this armed group which is at the school: "Come on, you all are endangering the lives of our children, the very infrastructure of society, the infrastructure that you yourselves are supposedly defending." When these townspeople get together to sort of shore each other up, this is a humanitarian approach.

What we do in San Pablo is get together with representatives of the whole municipality, of unions, of street people, to defend certain interests, not so much of the town itself, or not so much of the individuals, but, rather, interests which affect all of us.

The beginning of this process was when the guerrilla front tried to destroy the towers which provided electricity to the plant that employed more than 350 or 400 workers. This provided 70%-80% of the town's economy. This touched on a collective interest, because if the plant were to shut down, not only would the workers be on the street looking for something to do, but also, the industry would be destroyed and with it the transportation industry. This would affect all of us.

So we joined together in a large assembly called by the mayor, who invited many people. I remember the Municipal Board debating until three in the morning. I

call that day the Day of the Constitution, since it provided our guidelines. We designed our methods of working, some committees; and we confronted the problem. The first offer we had from the State was “This has to be met head on with arms.” Since we have never been convinced of this, we say “We’re going to use our own methods.”

So we formed committees. First, a committee that met with the then governor Alvaro Uribe—currently the President of Colombia—saying to him, “We are going to go to talk to this actor in conflict. We are in the middle, so we are going to see how we can best come out of this.” The governor backed us and said, “Wow, that’s one way... I’m pleased that you are taking an active role in this.” I don’t have the same mistrust of Alvaro Uribe as the majority of people. I see in him a harsh person, but we had the experience of seeing him as a facilitator of dialogues. He would say, “Go speak with the guys you’re talking about and just keep me informed because I’m in charge of this.”

We went regularly to where the paramilitaries were. We had never sat down to talk with paramilitaries. We saw them as unapproachable; they weren’t people to us. We went to where they were, we presented the problem, and we told them we were going to go where the guerrillas were, and they said to us, “Do it! Make a proposal, suggest something to them so we can find a way out of this.” And we went to the guerrillas. We had a development plan for San Pablo up our sleeves, and we said to them, “Well, it looks like we’re all into development. You all say you are fighting because there is no social development, and they say they are fighting against you because you are the ones who won’t permit any social development. It is a vicious circle. We are going to design a development plan that all of us have to sign on to.”

I remember it was called “Plan for the Development of the Ecotourist Potential of the Region of San Pablo.” It’s a very exotic region, with many bodies of water, ponds, very pretty, with exotic species of flora and fauna. We said, “We have to

get together on this because otherwise there won't be anything. You have to be in on it... you, the armed actors, trying, well, sort of, not to interfere too much in the free movement and security of the people, of private enterprise. We won't join if it's for war, but if it's for that work project, we're in. With this we got out of the conflict just a little bit." The mayor said, "I'll get on that bus, too. I'm also going to direct my institutional work, my investment, toward that work project."

So that's how the work we're doing... the committees meet, the parties approach each other. It's important to have that element of going to show the other, speak with the other, make plans... but to always have a proposal, to take something very much ours with us, something we've all shared and discussed, agreed upon, something that pulls us all together and let's us say "This is our proposal. If you have other ideas to give us, excellent. We'll take those too." You have to gather ideas, the many or the few, that the armed actors might have. They won't have a lot of time to think. But I would hope they would sit down and think about things like this.

So that was more or less how we had a few subsequent years of relative calm. There were fewer deaths; things were working.

Lately it's gotten bad again, but I think that the fact that it's gotten bad lately also reflects the national context. One can handle things locally and to a certain degree regionally, defending local interests and regional interests. But when you're in such a rough context, so difficult that the President can't reach an agreement with the leadership of the FARC (note: as has been the case after three years of conversation between the FARC and the Government, in San Vicente de Caguan), then each one is going to demonstrate how powerful he is and that works against local security, too; because in the final analysis the military strength that each one wants to show initially takes its toll on the small settlements, on the most vulnerable people.

I think we are beginning to deal with things very well. We are still dealing with them, but within a very difficult context, like being on a little island. It can't go on like this because what's on the outside affects what's on the inside. Things need to go both ways. We say "Locally we have to work for peace, but we also need certain conditions at a general level, at a national level." One felt heartened to hear talk of "Conversation Tables" (note: In San Vicente de Caguan), of positive things, but, well, in the final analysis, nothing was accomplished during the previous administration. That makes the small local mobilizations like ours vulnerable. But we are keeping afloat, thank God.

The second large component that I see in how we acted is: helping to maintain the ties between people, that is, helping people keep their morale up in spite of everything; helping to maintain the ties of solidarity, of friendship, of knowing each other. All of that human part. From the perspective of the institution, the municipality, I have contributed my grain of sand, from sports, to health, to culture. We have gone out into the streets a lot trying to help maintain the ties, in hopes of maintaining that social connection.

What keeps us alive is that the people continue to adhere to moral principles in a way you can't understand unless you have been there and lived among the people.

The third component is more difficult because it's not in our hands. It is, precisely, something like asking God, I don't know who else, to decrease the violence that comes from the outside a little, to make those large centers of great power try to be a little more humane and not export so much violence. I say this because war is not invented in a town or a village. People don't have the means to buy arms, people are given arms. They are paid and food is given to them, but by themselves the people aren't able to make war. That war is made possible, in my opinion, by some very important powers, both political and economical. It makes quite an impact to see how many people are armed.

Where is all that money coming from? Where is the money coming from that allows all of those people to eat? By armed, I mean both legally and illegally, the army too because it's quite large. Where is all the food for them coming from? Who pays the salaries? Where are those powerful weapons coming from? We aren't financing this war. The guerrilla fighters of the villages, the paramilitaries from the towns, they are more victims than victimizers. When a guerrilla falls, a victim of violence falls. When a paramilitary falls, a victim of violence falls. Because those who fall are always people of the villages of the region.

The mechanism we have been employing has yielded good results for several reasons. One indicator has been that none of us who have been there since the beginning has fallen under fire. We are alive. We have been in this six or seven years and we don't know how far we'll go. If one person dies in this, others will take over: the spirit and the leadership of this have to continue because it's our life. We have no other option. We believe that our security is not guaranteed by arms, much less if we bear them. The idea of our security is a humanitarian approach, social cohesion, participation and praying to God so that man... from the outside moving in will come more favorable winds because the winds have been harsh, very angry. When the good winds come, there will be a huge explosion of good things.