

Widow of Murdered Evangelist in Colombia Killed After Threats

Four months after guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (ELN) sent a murdered evangelist's wife their first demand to abandon her home in northeast Colombia's volatile Arauca department, the militants made good on their threats, report sources close to Open Doors, a ministry to persecuted Christians.

On Monday, Jan. 7, as the family's pastor finished an evening devotional in the home of widow Alicia Castilla, assassins entered the home and opened fire on her with pistols, killing her instantly in front of her three children and her father.

An Open Doors worker who cannot be named for security reasons told World Watch Monitor that before leaving the home, the guerrillas told Castilla's son, 18-year-old Hernán, that the rest of the family had three days to leave the region. After that, the killers warned, they would return and one by one kill other family members.

Castilla's death follows the murder of her husband, lay evangelist Nelson Ramos, two years before, in January 2011, also at the hands of the ELN. The armed rebel group holds a virtual sway of terror over the area.

Ramos, who had come to faith in Christ two years before his death, often shared the gospel in Saravena, a border town near Colombia's frontier with Venezuela. A few months after his conversion, the ELN issued its first expulsion order against him and his family.

“When Nelson preached, people were attracted to the gospel,” the Open Doors worker said. “He was always talking about Christ.”

Hernán Ramos, the couple’s son, told the Open Doors worker that, beyond denouncing his father for preaching, the guerrillas never fully explained why they so adamantly wanted to drive out the family. After he had received threats during 2010, guerrillas entered the family’s home and shot the elder Ramos as his wife and two small daughters watched.

In the months following Ramos’ death, Castilla feared that her son would carry out his stated plans to avenge the death of his father. But at a July 2011 encounter ministering to children in the **persecuted church** who have lost one or both parents (held by the ministry), Hernán renounced his earlier vow to join the Colombian military to gain training in weaponry and avenge his father’s murder. Instead he was baptized and became deeply involved in church activities.

Castilla, in her mid 40s, joined an Open Doors group that supports widowed victims of persecution. The group began in Arauca in 2010 and today includes 30 families across Colombia. The Open Doors worker last saw Castilla on Dec 21, in Saravena at a ministry workshop where Hernán restated his commitment to not avenge his father’s death.

While she was away attending the workshop, guerrillas visited Castilla’s house with a third warning to leave. Castilla was willing to move, but her elderly father was not.

“She was always bearing witness about forgiveness and living in peace,” the Open Doors worker said. “Alicia was a woman who was very committed to God, but from the start she was very worried about the threats.”

Although local government authorities are mandated to remove

murder victims from crime scenes, they refused to handle Castilla's body, fearing reprisals from the ELN insurgents. Finally funeral home workers retrieved her body.

"The local authorities understand who the guerrillas consider their enemy, and they prefer not to visit certain places," the Open Doors worker said.

Founded in 1964, the ELN is one of several illegal armed groups fighting for control of the rich petroleum resources in this area along Colombia's eastern-central border with Venezuela.

The violent groups use the Arauca department as a narco-trafficking route, forcibly recruit children into their ranks, and persecute those who oppose them, namely the church. A culture of death governs the region amid an atmosphere of fear and revenge.

"The ELN believe that Christians are brainwashed with the Bible, and that they will never support their revolution," the Open Doors worker said. The militants are also suspicious that Christians are spies and informants for the government, and complain that they give funds to their churches and refuse to support rebel activities.

"They also notice that when Christians fast and pray, the guerrillas' violent plans against them are oddly stopped!"

"We must pray that Hernán's heart and decisions don't change, that everything be transformed into blessing and not a chain of blood and hate," the Open Doors coordinator for Arauca said. "We pray for his protection, and also for his little sisters Rosmy and Jackeline, ages 9 and 6, who now face life without either one of their parents."