

Environmental Defenders: Losing Everything for Defending Life



The case of Dr. Yesid Blanco in Colombia

by Isis Alvarez

A recent report recognized Latin America as the most dangerous region for an environmental defender¹; Brazil, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico are at the top of the list, with more than 70% of the cases. Colombia now has the highest number of killings documented; in just over a decade, 461 defenders have been murdered, with 79 leaders killed just in 2023.

Environmental defenders face numerous risks for challenging powerful elites and speaking out against extractive projects that impact their communities. They may experience murder, forced disappearance, intimidation, defamation, and criminalization, with these retaliatory actions perpetrated not only by corporations but also by state organizations. The legacies of colonialism, including its economic model and socio-political structures, intensify inequalities and perpetuate corruption, creating an environment where violence can thrive. In practice, extractivism has been a mechanism of colonial and neocolonial plunder and appropriation² disproportionately affecting rural communities, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and environmental defenders. As a result, those who promote these projects often view environmental defenders as obstacles that need to be removed.

Colombia's complex history includes an internal conflict that has lasted over 60 years, involving various actors such as guerrillas, paramilitary groups, narcotraffickers, and military forces. Barrancabermeja is located in the middle valley of the Magdalena River, which has been one of the main centers of violence in the country since the 1960s. This region was originally inhabited by the Yariguíes indigenous group, which was largely exterminated by the end of the 20th century to enhance oil exploitation, which began in 1915³.

In 1951, Ecopetrol - the largest petroleum company in the country and part of the Carbon Majors – was officially created. A decade later, in 1961, it took control of the oil refinery that had been operating in Barrancabermeja since 1922. According to Prof. Avellaneda⁴, the prevailing conditions of inequity and segregation in oil-producing areas have fueled social, environmental, and political conflict, and Barrancabermeja is no exception. The development of the oil industry not only harmed biodiversity and clean water but also negatively impacted the local inhabitants. Indigenous peoples and 'colonos' were displaced from their territories, while workers who moved to the area in search of better livelihoods faced harsh living conditions.

¹ Global Witness. 2024. Missing Voices – The violent erasure of land and environmental defenders.

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/missing-voices/>

² Acosta, A. Extractivism and neoextractivism: two sides of the same curse. Transnational Institute (TNI).

https://www.tni.org/files/download/beyonddevelopment_extractivism.pdf

³ Conflicto: Explotación de hidrocarburos en la Superintendencia de Mares (Santander)

https://conflictosambientales.unal.edu.co/oca/env_problems/viewEnvProblem/50

⁴ Avellaneda, A. Oil, Environment & Conflict in Colombia. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kolumbien/01993/11.pdf>

In the 1950s, the formation of a workers' union led to some improvements in working conditions, however, conflicts with the oil-producing company persisted. The parastatal power structures allowed for ongoing abuses. During this time, guerrilla groups such as the ELN began to emerge, exacerbating the situation. By the 1980s, narco-paramilitary groups seized control of the area and maintained that dominance for decades. They infiltrated political life and consolidated their power, ensuring the success of their various businesses—both legal, like livestock production, and illegal, like drug trafficking. Anyone opposing their plans or demanding accountability risked becoming a target.

The territorial violence exerted by state institutions has facilitated the exploitation of natural resources. The militarization of territories to secure oil extraction, along with state repression of local populations and cooperation between state actors and paramilitary groups, has intensified the internal armed conflict, benefiting those seeking territorial control. Weak institutions and a lack of justice contribute to a culture of impunity, allowing those who pollute and/or harm environmental defenders to go unpunished. Despite the Peace Agreement established in 2016, the government has still not addressed its failures to enforce environmental laws or provide adequate protection for these defenders. According to the Ombudsman's office, by July 2024, 375 signatories of the Peace Agreement had been murdered in Colombia.



The case of Dr. Yesid Blanco, a well-known Colombian pediatrician who previously served as the Head of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the Magdalena Clinic in Barrancabermeja—often referred to as the "oil capital" of Colombia—illustrates how these dynamics unfold. In 2018, Dr. Blanco received the international 'Prize for Medical Achievement for A Better Life' by the International Organization for Medical Training and Research (IOCIM), among other international achievements in the field⁵.

⁵ Other awards: Colombia's Human Rights Defense Award; Model Citizen Award.

In 2007, when Dr. Blanco arrived in Barrancabermeja to work as a pediatrician, he observed that skin, respiratory, and gastrointestinal ailments were the most common health issues among the local population. Although he was aware of the poor water quality in the area, he did not anticipate becoming an advocate for people's right to clean water. However, later in his career, he shifted his focus to public health and ultimately became an environmental defender.

In 2016, the local epidemiological profile changed dramatically, with a significant increase in immunological diseases and cancer rates, as well as the emergence of rare conditions like anencephaly⁶ and Job syndrome⁷. As Dr. Blanco began investigating the potential causes, he was alarmed to discover that children, pregnant women, and even domestic animals in the Patio Bonito area of Barrancabermeja were presenting these health issues. Additionally, he noted that manatees and other wildlife were experiencing die-offs, only months after the settlement of the Yerbabuena landfill.



The sole source of drinking water for the city, which has a population of approximately 300,000 people, was the 'Ciénaga de San Silvestre', a protected wetland area that serves as a habitat for manatees and other wildlife and is recognized as part of the Jaguar Corridor. As such, any harmful activities in this area were prohibited. However, in 2014, the local environmental authority, the Autonomous Corporation of Santander (CAS), granted a license to the local company Rediba to construct a landfill in the heart of the Ciénaga without consulting the community beforehand. Notably, Ecopetrol provided CAS with a feasibility study recommending this specific location for the landfill. Dr. Blanco and other local activists believe that this decision was a strategically calculated move by the oil company, as oil extraction with different techniques including fracking, are permissible in contaminated areas.

Dr. Blanco's research led him to collect water samples from the area, revealing alarmingly high levels of mercury. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends safe levels of 0.002 mg/kg, yet recent samples showed levels of 4.25 mg/kg, which is 225 times higher than the safe limit. Dr. Blanco immediately linked the surge in disease to the contaminated public water supply. Together with the assistance of a local organization, he reported these findings to various authorities, but unfortunately, most claims were dismissed and thus, Dr.

⁶ Characterized by patients lacking a major portion of the brain, skull, and scalp that occurs during embryonic development.

⁷ A rare, primary immunodeficiency distinguished by the clinical triad of atopic dermatitis, recurrent skin staphylococcal infections, and recurrent pulmonary infections.

Blanco became a target of defamation by the city mayor. In response, he initiated a process to revoke the mayor's position; however, he faced significant challenges because the mayor had strong connections with paramilitary groups some of whose members had close ties to the well-known powerful British Petroleum company (BP).

Recognizing that his struggle was gaining broader implications, Dr. Blanco continued to fight through his organization, Corporación Yariguíes. They succeeded in shutting down one of the two proposed landfills (Anchicayá), but the situation remained dire. Following their initial complaints, the Constitutional Court ordered Rediba, the landfill company, to manage leachate pollution affecting local drinking water through improved wastewater management. Unfortunately, this “solution” had little impact due to a lack of enforcement. Later, news broke that Flor María Rangel, the head of the CAS responsible for issuing the landfill operating license in a protected area, was jailed on corruption charges.



Dr. Blanco's ordeal began with defamation, persecution, and criminalization that ultimately forced him and his family to seek asylum abroad. After he refused to accept bribes, paramilitaries turned politicians benefitting from the landfill launched a vicious smear campaign against him. Some former patients were approached and offered money to falsely accuse Dr. Blanco of malpractice, but only one family agreed to help the criminals achieve their objectives. Despite the Ethical Medical Tribunal finding him not guilty, a judge inexplicably reopened the case months later. As a result, Dr. Blanco was hit with a charge of half a million dollars, leading to the confiscation of all his possessions and pushing him toward bankruptcy. This legal process remains ongoing.

The threats against Dr. Blanco and his family increased, prompting him to leave his job at the Magdalena Clinic. A few months later, he made the decision to leave the country after learning that an order had been issued for his assassination and discovering the identities of the potential killers. Unfortunately, the state protection he had requested never arrived. With assistance from a human rights organization, he managed to flee the country in 2018, and now, seven years later, he still cannot return.

Few people who have been persecuted and harassed the way Dr. Blanco has endured, are still alive to tell the story. But another story unfolds after he and his family arrived in a foreign country with no money for a fresh start; in order to make ends meet, Dr. Blanco had to take all sorts of low-paid jobs, such as a construction worker. The whole situation obviously took a toll on Dr. Blanco's health, anxiety and depression hit, among other ailments of the list. He also got divorced while the company Rediba continued to operate freely. According to Global Witness, French corporate giant Veolia, which claims to be the world's "leading" company on environmental, social and governance (ESG) criteria, bought the landfill in 2019, even knowing about Rediba's grim past.



While the company continues to profit, local defenders, communities, and ecosystems continue to suffer. In February 2024, Colombia's President Gustavo Petro proposed in Barrancabermeja that the region should no longer be an environmental sacrifice zone and instead become a centre for clean energy, as companies like Ecopetrol will need to transition to more climate-friendly technologies: in 2017, at the height of the legal complaints, Dr. Blanco and community members had met with Gustavo Petro (who was an opposition senator at the time). He was aware of their situation, but no tangible action resulted from that meeting.

Today, Dr. Blanco, alongside the communities affected by corrupt politicians and greedy corporations, continues to rely on collective action. They have found crucial support from various networks over the years, including environmental and human rights organizations, academic institutions, and the media, all of which have helped raise awareness about Dr. Blanco's case. Although a clear solution is not yet visible, despite multiple international legal instruments that protect environmental defenders, a glimmer of hope has emerged from the European Union. The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) establishes a corporate duty for large companies to identify and address adverse human rights impacts (such as child labor) and environmental effects (like pollution) in their operations, those of their subsidiaries, and across their supply chains.⁸

In the meantime, as the Directive becomes operational, Dr. Blanco reminisces about his days as a doctor and expresses a desire to return to the city he feels 'gave him everything.'

⁸ Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/7a3e9980-5fda-4760-8f25-bc5571806033_en?filename=240719_CSDD_FAQ_final.pdf