

GREEN LETTER No. 65

19th June 2004

Most of this Green Letter consists of reports from Anne Barr who for years has been fighting for justice for two members of our ecological community who were murdered in July, 2000. They were both 18.

On being interviewed by a murderer's lawyer

When we first settled in the wilds of Colombia in the 80s, whenever the question of Injustice came up, our peasant neighbours would always with utter conviction tell us that it was dangerous to report, sue or bear witness against anyone ever, however foul their crime. With our fresh European mindset, we would look quizzically at such neighbours and think perhaps that they just didn't understand how the law worked.

But it was us who didn't understand. Nearly four years after two of our teenage boys were 'executed' - the grotesque term used by their killers - Anne is still undergoing a crash-course in Colombian 'justice'.

The latest 'crash' was Anne being summoned to the Public Prosecutor's office (Fiscalia in Spanish) to be cross-questioned for five hours by the Defence lawyer of two of the gang of killers. Such a concept is bizarre enough, but here is what Anne reports of her 'interview':

"At first the lawyer was hateful, attempting to trash all the information we had been given about the boys' deaths, which is of necessity 'hearsay'. He kept pressing to know who gave each bit of information - a very dangerous line of questioning for the many people who have risked their lives to help us. I told him that two of our witnesses are already dead because they tried to help - poisoned by the same gang.

"As Defender of FARC prisoners, the lawyer was obviously leftwing, so I pressed the point that the gang of militiamen who had slaughtered our lads had terrorized the whole region where we used to live, had

killed dozens of innocent people and had destroyed a previously very peaceful guerrilla-run area, done enormous political damage to the leftwing and to the credibility of the FARC especially during the failed Peace process, had been totally unrestrained by their leaders and had caused many local people to look to the army and the paramilitaries in desperation, and that all these atrocities had been committed under the banner of 'revolution'.

"It was a risk to say all this in front of the Government Prosecutor where everything was being written down! but I saw no other way round the situation where the Defence lawyer was essentially insinuating that we were persecuting the guerrilla just because they are guerrillas and that his client was victim of our over-emotional reactions.

"At one point, there was a coffee break when nothing was being written down, so I grabbed the opportunity to tell the Defence lawyer that he did not understand our perspective or our politics and that where I had spent yesterday (a Sunday) and all my Sundays in Bogota was in the guerrilla section of the high security wings of various prisons with the three Irishmen accused of being FARC trainers, and talking to many FARC commanders. I also asked him to help Gerardo, a young man who has been in jail for over a year falsely accused of being a guerrilla. I told him that throughout all the tragedy of our boys' murders, we were careful not to let the rightwing government use our personal devastation to foment more violence, but if this particular gang leader got out of jail he would be responsible for a lot more innocent people's deaths and would ruin whatever region he was sent to. I told him that we had always lived in 'red zones' (FARC-controlled areas) in the countryside even after all that had happened to us.

"After this, he apologized and said it was just his job. But he is obviously very leftwing and seems to be genuinely convinced that Arnulfo (the head of the group who killed our boys) is innocent. He also seems to be a good lawyer which is very worrying as apart from the injustice, it would be dangerous for us

if these killers are released, as they will be baying for our blood. Arnulfo and his brother are trying to say that the copy-book where they proudly wrote that on 9th July 2000 they had 'executed' two 'Irishmen' (Javier was a dark-skinned Colombian, Tristan was Irish) was forged and planted on them by the Army, though the handwriting tests show that it is definitely Arnulfo's writing. This is the only hard evidence we have so far, as obviously no peasant who saw the boys captured, tied up and dragged away dares to testify, much less anyone who saw them killed.

"However, our main informer, X, is seriously considering coming out into the open as a witness as he has so little left to lose now that he is in so much danger that he cannot work on his farm any more. He can testify that Arnulfo was the local guerrilla commander for many years and that he, X, was at many meetings where Arnulfo openly threatened the local people when they tried to complain about killings and other bad treatment. However, our friend is not a witness to the killers actually taking the boys away.

"At no point during my interrogation by the Defence lawyer was I allowed to ask any questions, or rather, he was not obliged to answer those I asked anyway, like: does he know the region we lived in, does he know how well run it used to be before the murdering gang arrived there and ruined everything? Does he know he is defending a psychopath who has only damaged the legitimacy of the armed struggle and will continue doing so? These questions were not written down as I wasn't supposed to ask them.

"The Fiscal woman actually shot me glances of support and approval every time I turned my answers to his repetitive questions into semi-political speeches. After he asked me for the 89th time exactly who told me some bit of information, and I got tired of saying I couldn't put my sources at risk, I said I hoped to be able to satisfy his thirst for names just as soon as the witness protection programme had a new boss as the previous one was a dirty old man who spent his time running after his secretaries. This is a big scandal in the Fiscalia and this boss has been sacked, though obviously such petty misdemeanours

are nothing in comparison to his real crimes such as many anti-army and anti-paramilitary witnesses getting killed before they could testify.

"Both the Fiscal and the Defence lawyer thought me calling him a 'viejo verde' (dirty old man) was hilarious - I suppose laughing was a relief as the tension was very high. Things got a bit better after that. They also thought that it was very funny you, Jenny, writing that 'document' to Commander Gonzalo asking him to care for the birds and the trees on our farm when he came to bully us and throw us out!

"After the interrogation, the Fiscal woman told me that Louise, a teenager at the time of the murders, had to come and testify. I did not like her tone and asked her did she realize how much work, risk and expense our investigations meant for us, all of which should have been taken on by the Fiscalia and not by us. I said Louise could come more quickly if they paid the fare. Of course no way will they do this, and we are forced to comply so as not to block the process.

"On the way out of the office, I blacked out for a few seconds and almost fell on the floor, the guards got me to sit down and fetched me water and then I had to run into a loo to vomit. I felt shaken by all the s. I had taken into me. Then I went to find a woman lawyer friend now working in the anti-corruption department and we wrote a letter asking the Procuraduria (which oversees the correct behaviour of Govt. bodies) to invigilate the case as the Fiscalia has not made any advances in three and a half years and is not offering adequate witness protection. I was told only today that about a year ago, the murderers were almost set free as the time limit allowed for the Fiscalia to present proof against them had run out, and it was only the chance fact that their previous Defence lawyer resigned (through not being paid) before presenting a demand for their release that kept them behind bars at the time. This near-disaster about which we knew nothing was also prevented by the coincidence that just around that time, I managed to persuade a man who had been kidnapped by the same gang to testify, which kept them in jail another while."

Behind the scenes of the legal system.

Louise, now 23, is biologically Tristan's aunt, but being only one year older than him, was brought up as his sister and close companion. She has been deeply involved in the case against his murderers from the beginning, travelling to the previously demilitarized zone to talk to top FARC commanders, confronting the murderers in jail, and now being cross-questioned by their Defence lawyer. Anne continues with a report of this second interview:

"When Lou and I were in the queue to get into the Fiscalia, the man directly behind us was the defence lawyer, so we started on him immediately, giving him one of the girls' CDs of peace songs and social critique in an attempt to re-wash his brain as he has had it black-washed by the killers with their version of events as 'victims' of these mad reactionary foreign women.

"Whilst still in the queue, the lawyer started to say how innocent Arnulfo is: Louise responded very clearly and passionately with tears in her eyes that she had lived in the region where Tris died all her childhood and knew what was what and no-one was going to pull the wool over her eyes. That shut him up for the moment, but he stuck to us like glue from there on. I said on the stairs up to the office that if the killers had ever said anything like 'oh my god, what a terrible mistake, what can we do?' we would never have gone to the State, as we wanted the whole case dealt with by the guerrilla themselves. It was only because they denied everything and kept killing more people that we had been forced to work with the Army and the Government.

"Whilst waiting to see the Fiscalia, the lawyer came and sat near us, obviously fascinated by Louise. He is not wonderfully intelligent, but is dedicated to his work as a defence lawyer for political prisoners and one can't really blame him for thinking the men are innocent given that the State is rounding up all and sundry - as long as they are poor and live in Red Zones - and shoving them into jail. He told us about a lot of people in Icononzo, where we used to live, being imprisoned wrongly, including a woman I knew well who has nothing to do with the Guerrilla.

"I don't think any of what we said during the official interview really got through the curtain in his brain. It was only afterwards when he asked us to go for coffee and I took him to a friend's flat nearby that we really had time to get to him. Of course, he tried to keep everything stupid and superficial and had the usual 'sure-it's-alright-really' Colombian attitude: one is supposed to forgive and forget such enormous violence and join in the national state of deep denial that is going on, a whole country in a dark pit because the huge violations they commit daily on each other are not being dealt with on any level at all.

"The lawyer said he had wanted to talk to me for months but had no means of contacting me (that's good news - the murderers and their mates still on the loose didn't know where I was!) and that he wanted to organize a meeting between us and Arnulfo in prison! According to the lawyer, by meeting with him we are supposed to 'limar asperezas' - 'smooth out differences' - this is just such a disgusting concept. He kept repeating a tape he'd memorized about 'forgiving and forgetting'. I said he'd got it wrong. It was about Truth, Punishment and Compensation. He was disappointed that we weren't buying the shallow solution. I still feel so violent about this attitude. But I agreed to go to meet the murderer in jail.

"Louise managed to shut him up for a while by giving an excellent speech on why, if Arnulfo is innocent, was his reaction to the murders in the region under his command not one of: 'oh my god, what can we do? What on earth is going on here? Let's find the killers.' She said he is a leader in a political cause and should be a proper leader. I told the lawyer that I would be willing to work with him in helping people wrongly imprisoned but not to help killers who have only done damage to the social movement and even made peasants feel that the paramilitaries are a better option! I think he found it a bit shocking when I told him that this particular FARC band had even thrown the local peasants' Communist Party out of the region for complaining about guerrilla killings of innocents. We also told him about all our journeys throughout the years to talk with guerrilla commanders at the highest level regarding the murders. I think he was a bit out of his depth with us as we didn't quite fit in with his preconceived notions of ignorant foreigners

accusing the FARC and he will almost certainly think a lot about what we said.

"He took my telephone number, I have his. Now the question is: how to manage a meeting with the murderers without ending up frustrated at not being able to kill them! Although it is a possible beginning of what we wanted years ago - a more human way of

dealing with it all face to face, without having to go through the cold boredom of corrupt bureaucracy, I don't know how to handle it as the first image that comes to my mind is of torture instruments and a free hand to use them.. Beyond that, I am very glad of this new opening." - Anne

How to Get a Colombian Visa

Colombian bureaucracy is an expensive nightmare. Recently Anne's visa ran out and she could no longer renew it through our 'Ecological Foundation' as we could show no movement of funds, as there weren't any. So as she absolutely has to stay in Bogota to shepherd our nigh-on impossible court case to its conclusion - a process that will take years - and needs to 'stay legal' to do this, after being threatened with deportation, she was eventually advised to apply for a special visa we'd never heard of before called a 'caso no previsto' which means literally 'an unforeseen case.'

However, the lower echelons of the bureaucratic establishment don't like cases that don't fit into the usual boxes. Here is part of the very Colombian story of her recent skirmishes and battles in this department:

"I went back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was almost immediately shouted at by the same man who had shouted at me the day before. He literally threw my passport back over the counter at me and said it was in too horrible a state to put a visa in. It is in the same state as it has been in for the last four visits during the last three months, i.e. a bit scruffy. When he took a breath, I mentioned this. I said I would be illegal the next day and a new clean Irish passport would take at least a month to obtain as there is no Irish Embassy in Colombia, and that I needed a 'salvo-conducto' - 'safe-conduct'- to bridge the gap.

"He said he couldn't do anything about that. I said well, he would have to as I was staying there in the Ministry until someone sorted it out, and I said I wanted an interview with his boss. He said I couldn't have one. I said I had to have one. He waved me away to talk to a poor little security woman who has no power to decide anything. So I had to do a sit-down strike on her until she took my papers back to

the offices off-stage. Most of this unfolding drama took place centre-stage in front of dozens of people waiting.

"Meanwhile I gained some support from the visa lawyers I know there who said: stick it out, you're in the right. So I sat and waited and was accosted by four different officials who each came to tell me I had to leave the country/apply for a visa in Ecuador/buy an air ticket to Ireland, all efforts to unofficially deport me. I stayed very calm and said No, I was staying till someone sorted my situation out as I live here. The last one who tried the Ecuador number annoyed me and I asked was this an attempt to deport me illegally and if so, I would sue them. This must have been the right thing to say, as I was then finally taken to see the boss, accompanied by all four prefects who were going to tell the headmaster I was a bad girl.

"Then I met the Boss. He was totally relaxed, scruffy, with longish red hair, a beard, blue eyes smiling and looking like he thought it was all ridiculous. I nearly burst into tears with relief. The three female officials (I'm afraid women are always the worst in these situations) started going through the rather enormous file they have on all my ups and downs and ins and outs. The boss didn't listen as they cross-examined me. So the women sort of wound down as no-one was getting excited about their interrogation of me, and when they finally left, the boss asked the remaining man how they could sort out my situation? "I talked about Tris and Javier's deaths and couldn't stop crying. They talked legalities and came to some not too legal way to give me a year's visa, though I do have to get a new passport as mine is evidently not pretty enough to put a Colombian visa into. Then the boss asked me how I keep myself in Bogota. Deciding not to bother with lies, I said that although I have no work-permit, I earn

my keep as an astrologer.. Whereupon he immediately rang his mother to get his time of birth and I am to do his chart in a minute. Then he asked more about our community, and I gave him a copy of the social and political CD the girls have produced, which is, incidentally, also technically illegal as they don't have work permits either! The other man laughed as I took it out of my bag and said, 'You really are a 'caso no previsto' - an 'unforeseen case.'

"Then (because of my two paper marriages for previous visas) he asked me how many Colombian men I'd 'gone through'. I asked were we on or off the record, because if we were 'off', I had a lot to say about Colombian men. That shut him up.

"I then had a long wait while the man in the office who had shouted at me and who - oh sweet revenge - had to do the paperwork for the visa he didn't want to give me, tried to mess me around, saying my photos were no good. I said, 'Sorry, that's what I look like' and that they had been taken in an official passport place. Then he asked angrily how long they were giving me. A year, I said. 'That's far too long', he

said. A lot of people were listening and giggling as he is known to be hateful and treats everyone badly if he can get away with it.

"Finally after hours I was given a Colombian travel document that is valid for one month but containing a visa that is valid for a year, and exactly on what basis I was given this visa none of the lawyers I was sitting chatting with could figure out, in fact the visa is evidently totally illegal .

"And then they refused to give me back my passport as I can't have two travel documents . but I have to have it to get a new one as requested. So I did another brief sitdown strike and finally got it given back, and eventually walked out feeling triumphant, though leaving behind me a trail of people very pissed off with me. I'm sorry if all this comes across as mad. That's because it was.

"And in the middle of all this, I talked for several fascinating hours with a lawyer who sees ghosts and knows all her past lives ."

A Tale of Two Cities called Bogota

For reasons unfathomable to me, several groups of Northern 'Greens', including Ecologist magazine have got hold of the idea that the unbearably polluted and traffic-ridden capital of Colombia, Bogota, is a 'model city.' This seems to be due to the self-advertising of two former Mayors, Antanas Mockus and Penalosa. Fed up with reading these glowing and totally unrealistic reports, I asked Anne, as someone who lives there, for her comments on this. She writes:

"The small improvements to public spaces are a coverup that could only fool people who live their lives within the prettified part of Bogota, and of course there are many middle class ecologists who keep within those bounds. It was a relief for many well-off Bogotanos to have Mockus as mayor - someone who has a nice, alternative façade that satisfied guilty consciences but who in reality changed none of the deep inequalities of this city and indeed made some of them worse. For instance, he made it illegal to sell on the sidewalks: hundreds of thousands of poor people depend on this informal commerce to keep body and soul together. But Mockus, whose main aim was to rock no big boats in this city of inhumanly and unbelievably wide social

and economic gaps and to stroke none of the fat cats up the wrong way, put the sellers of shoes laces and socks off the streets to keep the big chain stores happy.

"As far as real ecology was concerned, he was happy for the last remaining wetlands to be built upon and willing to sacrifice a lot of the surrounding forest reserves to the gods of huge profits. Only the mobilization of local people stopped this. As for the wonderful clean new transport system: try travelling on it. It is always scarily packed full, and of the huge profits, so many millions per month that they do not fit in my head, most go to eight private investors. Four percent goes to the City but then the City must pay for the upkeep of the buses from that four percent. If you are a Neo-liberal, that is called good business practice.

"Now if you would like to hear about a Mayor with balls, let us look at the new head of Bogota, Lucho Garzon: he is a trade unionist from a poor background, with no father and his mother cleaned houses for a living. The extreme right wing government led by Alvaro Uribe have labelled him

the FARC mayor. This is no less than a death sentence in Colombia.

"At the first formal meeting between Lucho and Uribe, Lucho's opening phrase was: 'Do you really think I represent the FARC?' Uribe, to whom honesty doesn't come naturally, was so taken aback he couldn't answer. This was not reported in the press - I heard it from someone who was there. For the record, Lucho has been just as straightforward with the FARC in expressing his disgust for many of their methods.

"So as not to limit his administration to the tattered-up part of Bogota, Lucho has begun to move his office around all the poorer areas. Last weekend, he was in Ciudad Bolivar where there are over a million people who live far below the poverty line, an area where the army are said to be killing local people and blaming it on the FARC, just to 'prove' that an army

base must be built there to protect the people. This information comes from the police! Almost everyone in Ciudad Bolivar voted for Lucho.

"In the midst of all this, Lucho calls open meetings all over the city and mixes with people freely and without body guards. This is unheard of here and has his closest aides in a state of near nervous collapse. But as they say, he wouldn't be Lucho if he were surrounded by body guards.

"At one of the most exclusive clubs recently, he suggested to the members that they do a 'humanitarian exchange' with people from the poor areas as a form of education .. They laughed and thought he was quite quaint."

Really Turning the City Green

Anne has been asked to help lead urban farming projects for the very poor as we are known for our many years of experience in organic gardening and food production in the wilds of the Colombian countryside. Here is a report from her on one of the initial meetings:

"I went to the botanical gardens where there was a really moving group meeting taking place with people from the barrios (slums) and desplazados (displaced persons - rural refugees fleeing violence in their regions), who have made gardens and communal eating places with help from no-one. It was all very basic but utterly admirable and very political. One chancer in a suit tried to say everyone had to get together to sell their produce; he was so different from everyone else. I got annoyed and said selling wasn't the point, but growing to eat was, that there is nothing more revolutionary than growing your own food, that vegetables are more powerful than bullets, and that's why the Neoliberals don't want this programme to work. I got cheered. There were a few boring technocrats and some of the no-foreign-plant-species-here fanatics, but most of the group were just really

basic, radical, poor people. I have the addresses of the best ones and I will visit them some time.

"One skinny man, a refugee from the Sur de Bolivar (paramilitary country) gave a brilliant speech about displaced people and the hatefulness of the Government's so-called 'Network of Solidarity' for not ever helping them. He is helping transform the grounds of the once-brilliant people's hospital San Juan de Dios, now closed down by Uribe, into gardens for the refugees. He is very poor, skinny and ill. Afterwards I gave him a bit of money and collected all the left-over packed sandwiches and juices we'd been given at the meeting for him. I asked him for a telephone number, but he said he couldn't give it out as he gets threats. But once he found out that I was Irish and visit political prisoners like my three countrymen, he said we had a lot to talk about and gave it to me."

Anne is at present investigating requests for us to become involved with these projects on a very large scale. We will have to make a big decision as it will involve a huge input of time, labour and our extremely stretched resources. More news in the next Green Letter on this.

Moving Colombia with Music

Let us now return to the Southern Colombian countryside where our young girls are making waves with their music. Here is a report from Louise:

"Semillas de Paz: Seeds of Peace, is the name of our first CD of songs about ecology, peace, anti-drugs, anti-war, anti-formal education, anti-money, and - why not - a couple of love songs. It was recorded simply in a good studio, all the excellent musicians playing for free because of their strong feelings for our message.

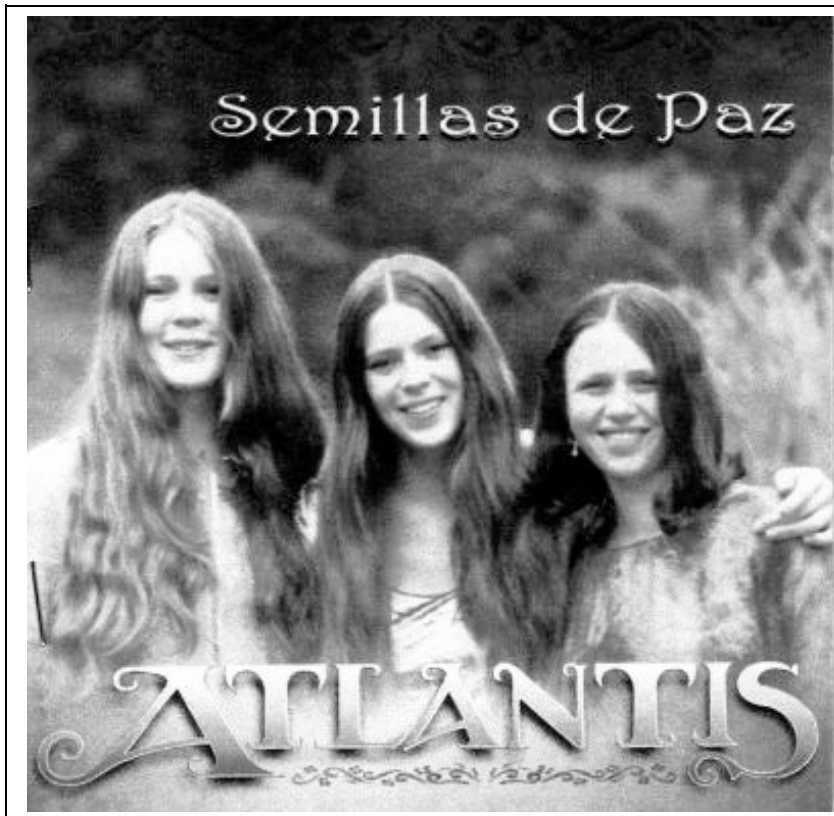
"We made 1000 copies which we have been gradually selling, swapping, using as payment, and giving to special friends and helpers. The reception is more amazing than I could ever have imagined. The times when we sell our CDs most is after a singing show; people come up to us sometimes in tears because we are singing for Colombia, about the violence and the beauty, the deaths and the huge hope and potential to be a peaceful, multi-cultured country full of life, and many other issues which are important to the people here. We also sell it by asking the drivers of buses, the owners of restaurants and the people that pick us up when hitching, to play it. Nearly every time someone hears it, they buy one.

"Recently in a distant mountain village called Balboa, my 18-year-old sister Katie and I sang for a big group of refugees. It was one of the most beautiful experiences we have had singing in years, no microphones, no stage, just us and them in an open field. We sang for ages, we talked too, we told them

we had been displaced as well and that we had lost relatives we loved so much. We all knew what it felt like and no-one could understand each other better. They were from all different parts of Colombia, but had become one big family, all working together to build new little homes with a small bit of help from the government.

"We saw mainly women working on the house-building, and tiny children too. I suppose a lot of their men had been killed. We got a friend to make a copy of our CD for each family and they were so

grateful, I was embarrassed, and they promised us that if and when we return, they will know all our songs off by heart and would sing with us! I wanted to give them everything I had. If I had had my rucksack with me, I would have definitely given everything away and returned without it. At the end, they said we had given them the best gift ever: encouragement and 'animo' - heart or courage - and that the messages in our songs were very important to them.



"We even gave a talk on vegetarianism and compost in the middle of it all; it was so relaxed, we felt totally at home with them. I will never forget them and we hope to go back there some day.

"It is not only in Colombia that our CD has been heard, but in many other countries and I want to take this opportunity to thank all the people who have heard it and sent such beautiful, encouraging feedback. We hope to record another one soon, and also one in English. I send my love and gratitude to everyone who helped. Louise."

Advice for Babies..

Over now to our own farm, where 20 year old Alice lives with her new baby. Here she sends the latest list of Rules on Childrearing she has received from peasant women in the area:

1. Don't cut a baby's hair as it will never talk. 2. If a baby has hiccups, that is good as it means it is

growing. 3. You should wrap newspaper around the baby's stomach to stop it getting sick. 4. Never uncover a baby's back, or it will die of cold. 5. Hit or whip a child when it falls or hurts itself so it learns not to do it again!

And an everyday story of Colombian Country Life from Julie, aged 15

"One day I met one of the soldiers who had caught Eber in the mountains you can see across from our farm (see last Green Letter for this story). He told me that that day, they were looking across the valley through binoculars and saw me walking up to our farm. I was dressed all in black and they were totally convinced I was a guerrilla soldier. One of them was saying: 'shoot, shoot!' but then they saw that I was female so they didn't shoot me. "I asked what would have happened to him if he had shot me, thinking he would have been put in jail. He said, 'Oh, nothing.' And he told me that once one of his companions killed a man by accident - the man was a house-guard, it was night-time and the man came running towards him and he shot him thinking he was

a guerrilla. So they put a gun in the dead man's hand. He said they would have done the same with me.

"Recently the army went to the country town of Leticia and killed a head of the guerrillas there. Nearby there were two Guambiano Indian girls, one of them was three months pregnant. The army raped them and then shot them, their brother was hiding and saw it all happen. Alice says that after killing them, they put uniforms on them and guns in their hands and said they were guerrillas. She says that day she was travelling in the milkman's van and on the radio they were saying that they had killed and captured lots of guerrillas."

Contact Details

These Green Letters, giving news of Colombian reality as directly experienced by members of the Atlantis Ecological Community are compiled by Jenny James, email: jennyjames@softhome.net.

The full set of Green Letters dating back to 1995 can be viewed on: www.afan.org.uk Correspondence and inquiries welcomed either by email to Jenny or post to: Atlantis, Telecom, Belen, Huila, Colombia Books on Atlantis Community available electronically at www.deunantbooks.com Information and photos of S.V. Atlantis Adventure, the community's campaigning sailing ship:

<http://www.thesupplydepot.co.uk/AtlantisAdventure.html>

Jenny and her daughter Louise are at the moment travelling in Ireland and England in connection with Bush's visit to Ireland and associated political campaigns, and are available for informal talks or meetings, or to hear Louise's songs. Write to email address above.