

BAJO FUEGO

"UNDER FIRE"

A portrait of coca-peasants in the southwest of Colombia:
on the unraveling of peace as the war continues.

A Documentary by SJOERD VAN GROOTHEEST & IRENE VÉLEZ TORRES

A MISSISSIPPI DRAGONFLY PRODUCTION



In collaboration with
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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Bajo Fuego depicts the unraveling of peace for a group of coca growing peasants in the southwest of Colombia. The film takes the perspective of the 'cocaleros' and over a period of 3 years shows how they survive in the midst of the most difficult of circumstances; the government delays in fulfilling what it promised in the agreement, economic difficulties arise for families that substituted their coca trees, and armed groups take control over the region. The promised peace in Colombia turns out to be an illusion when armed groups terrorize the region, assassinations occur, and the films' main protagonists are being threatened with their lives and displaced from their homes. Even though a peace agreement was signed in Colombia, Bajo Fuego shows that for many in the southwest of Colombia the war continues.

LONG SYNOPSIS

In 2016 a historic Peace Agreement was signed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrilla. The actual implementation of the Agreement, however, is proving much more difficult than the signing itself. Through the accompaniment of a group of coca growing peasants during a period of 3 years, this documentary shows the continuation of the war in the Cauca province, one of the areas historically most affected by violence. It is about the life of poor peasants, coca growers, peasant guards and social leaders, who are committed to the promised future of peace but face enormous personal, economic and political challenges to achieve it.

This documentary depicts the hopes of Briceida and Leider, a peasant couple that relies on government support to change their coca and marihuana crops. However, one year after the signing of the Peace Agreement the government changes, a new president is elected, and the commitment to the peace agreement dissolves rapidly. Meanwhile, a newly armed group appears, visits them at home, and threatens them with their lives, effectively moving them out of the territory. Two years after the signing of the Agreement, Leider and Briceida still depend on illicit crops, despite their commitment to the voluntary substitution program.

Bajo Fuego also accompanies Wilderemar's dedication to community work and his commitment to territorial control. A jovial peasant, who, as the coordinator of the local Peasant Guard, seeks to strengthen territorial control and facilitate access by peasants to a large cattle ranch in the area. He ends up being threatened at gunpoint by an armed group, and when they kill a friend of his, the peasant guard is forced to close the checkpoints in rural areas.

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And it shows Gustavo, a leader of the peasant social organization. As a result of a kidnapping that happened some years ago, he is permanently protected by an armed bodyguard who accompanies him while he works his small union farm. After new death threats, Gustavo considers that the only way out is to go into exile, and leave to Canada with his family.

In the course of 2019, the stories of these protagonists come together as they organize 'La Minga'; a large community protest, which includes the blockade of the Pan-American highway that connects Colombia with Ecuador. At this point in the documentary, we understand the anger of the peasants, the frustration that comes with their impotence in the face of the continuing violence and the wave of death threats and murders in their region.

The 'Minga' eventually results in a violent confrontation between riot police and peasants, during which the peasants are forced to retreat. When Colombia's president Ivan Duque arrives to the Cauca to negotiate the end of the protest, the peasants are disappointed again, as the president refuses to participate in a public ceremony and flies off in his personal helicopter on his way to Bogotá.

In the year that follows, the violent confrontations increase and result in the murder of a member of the peasant guard. Meanwhile the substitution program is perpetually delayed. Wilderemar decides to halt the guard's work, Briceida attends a funeral of a community member that was killed, and Gustavo finds a way out of Colombia with his family. The conditions that have been the foundation for a decade long armed conflict are shown not to be changing, and so the cycles of war, violence, and social mobilization continue.

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PROTAGONISTS

'Briseida & Leider: Social leaders in Miranda, Cauca

Leider is the regional representative of COCCAM, an organization that aims to protect the interests of coca growers. Briceida has responsibilities in the representation of the many victims that the internal armed conflict in Colombia has left behind. They are important local leaders, who aim to protect the Peace Agreement that was negotiated and signed by the government and the FARC-EP.

The couple, (parents of 4 children, have high hopes and are relieved by the opportunity offered by the Peace Agreement to leave coca cultivation in the past with the help of the government. But throughout the first year following the signing of the Agreement, the couple feels increasingly disappointed. As they attempt to promote the substitution of illicit crops as formulated in the agreement, they start to receive death threats. Finding themselves cornered at home and threatened with firearms, Leider and Briceida are forced to move to protect their family and find another place to live.

Gustavo: 3 generations of violence

Gustavo is a social leader of 31 years, and the vice president of a peasant association. A paramilitary group in the region threatened him with his life and kidnapped him for 48 hours in 2015. Ever since, he has been permanently marked by two armed bodyguards.

Gustavo's family history tells the story of the internal armed conflict in Colombia, which simply does not seem to have ended after the signing of the Agreement in 2016. It is a story of violence and conflict that continues to return, generation after generation, and is based on inequality, poverty and denial of rights to marginalized communities such as these very same peasants.

Wildermar & the Peasant Guard

We get to know Wildermar, who is part of the Peasant Guard; an unarmed security organization that was erected after the demobilization of the FARC-EP and has the objective of protecting the communities in the territory and ensuring security in the area. Wildermar reflects on security before the Peace Agreement and the challenge of the territorial control, after the Sixth Front of the FARC-EP laid down its guns.

While the first few months after the signing of the Agreement brought some unexpected tranquility to the region, peace soon came under pressure. When a fellow member of the peasant guard was killed, Wildermar decides to halt all activities of the unarmed guard, as they are no longer sure whether they can continue their presence and control without having to fear for their lives.



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FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Bajo Fuego is set in the north of Cauca, a region that has been marked by a high production of illicit crops: from poppy (base for heroin) in the 1980s, to coca and marijuana that have been cultivated since the 1990s. Most of the armed groups in the region have been an integral part of this economy through the taxation of the preparation and transportation of coca paste and marihuana. The historical exclusion from economic progress, rural development and political participation of peasant and indigenous communities found its product in a volatile region in which social and environmental conflicts have more than often been resolved with military or otherwise extremely violent means.

The Peace Accord signed in 2016 constituted an opportunity to change the trend of marginalization and armed conflict, and was guarantee access to land, technical assistance for rural development and support with the substitution of illicit coca and marihuana crops. We considered it very important to be present and film in the context of the implementation of the peace agreement while allowing for the perspective of the peasants to be central in the representation of the current historical moment. We believe that the internal armed conflict in Colombia has been the result of a history of segregation and neglect, and to allow for the voices of the marginalized to be heard, we believe, can be of great value in the visualization and propagation of the importance of the proper, full and timely implementation of the Peace Accord as signed in 2016.

While the documentary departs with a focus on coca and the substitution program, throughout it also talks about issues of security, human rights and territorial control. From the first year of research and production we noticed that the security in the region is very fragile, with a particular sense of deterioration after the election of president Ivan Duque. Several armed groups appeared in the year after the demobilization of FARC-EP, and many local leaders are still under threat by some of these groups, who are not supportive of the substitution of an illicit economy for a licit one.

Finally, we believe that the documentary genre is important in the visualization of human rights issues, as it allows for broader audiences to connect directly to people that go through these situations on a quotidian basis. Through the humanization of the historically stigmatized coca peasants in Colombia, and the visualization of the harsh realities that are the result of a lack of political will and commitment to implement the Peace Accord or invest in rural population more generally, we aim to stimulate empathy-based networks and grow political support and pressure in the benefit of positive change for Colombia's marginalized regions and communities.

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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Sjoerd van Grootheest (*director/producer*), graduated in Cultural and Media Studies (MA) and Anthropology (Bsc.), is currently active as an independent documentary director in Colombia. His latest production is called *Voces de Guerrilla* that depicts the year of demobilization of the 6th front of FARC-EP in a rehabilitation camp in the North of Cauca province. It has been selected by international film festivals in Europe and the America's, received several special mentions and won the price for best feature documentary at the Festival de Cine por los Derechos Humanos en Bogotá 2018. He is especially interested in the representation of stigmatized and/or marginalized communities, and is committed to the quest for positive social change.

Irene Vélez-Torres (*producer / co-director*) is currently attached to the University of Valle as Full Professor and specializes in socio-environmental conflicts and ethno-racial inequalities. While engaging in research she frequently applies audio-visual technology as a research methodology or as a means to present her findings and experiences to a broader audience rather than just an academic one. In 2015 she produced two mid-length documentaries as part of a broad and international research project about environmental conflicts in the Cauca province. Her latest production is called '*Voces de Guerrilla*', which she produced together with Sjoerd van Grootheest.

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TEASERS & AUDIOVISUAL MATERIAL


Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/341846821>


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TECHNICAL INFO

Format: 2K (2048x1080P)

Length: 85 min

Audio: Stereo, 5.1 Dolby

Screening Format:

DCP / Blu-Ray / H.264

Language: Spanish

Subtitles: French; Portuguese; English