

## The May 22nd Bombing

*By Curt Wands*

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4:00 am, May 23, 2004  
Apartadó, Colombia

It is silent right now, except for the crickets, a rare occurrence in this city of 80,000. Normally all-too-loud music plays into the Saturday night as people dance in this city. That all ended abruptly at 10:00 pm when the bomb went off in our town center. I felt my room vibrate and the lights briefly flickered off. I knew. Within minutes, sirens were wailing, the few ambulances in this city racing to the site of what had been a disco. I put on my clothes, grabbed my medical bag and headed to the hospital. I have no official standing there, but I also know that at times like this, all help is gladly accepted.

It is now six hours since the blast. As I left the hospital a few minutes ago, the operating room was being mopped and cleaned after we left it flooded with blood, waters and soaps, packages from sterile bandaging, and the leftovers of trauma, including the body parts too horrific to write about.

Triage is a cold word to describe the rapid decision made to place injured people into order at moments of crisis and mass casualties. Patients are placed into one of three groups; those whose wounds can wait, those whose wounds are too serious to survive, and those who will might survive if their wounds receive immediate attention. The young woman with a light scalp laceration can wait. What is left of the person who was nearer the blast will receive no further attention. She is declared dead on arrival. I begin working with a surgeon, an anesthesiologist, and two nurses on an AfroColombian woman, in her 30's. I did not get to learn her name tonight or learn anything about what brought her to the disco. She was unconscious on arrival and most of her clothing burned or blown off. There was no identification and her relatives may be one of any of the hundreds outside the hospital gate, or perhaps another of the victims. Her burns, mostly 2nd and 3rd degree, cover 30% of her body surface. The charred stench is still in my nose from breathing it in through the surgical mask. We spent an hour and a half removing the outer epidermis skin layer that peeled off, cleansing the charred, deeper layer, removing shards of wood and metal shrapnel from the blast, leaving open the gaping wounds in what was left of her left calf and left breast. She might survive if infection does not set in. Unfortunately we ran out of silver sulfadiazine, the most common anti-infective agent used in burn victims before we finished covering all her burns. We were informed that due to the volume of patients there is no silver sulfadiazine left in the city tonight. This woman will not look the same, walk the same, or be the same when she awakens.

No one in the operating room referred to anything but the need to save the patient in front of us at the moment. When finishing with one, another is started. People in that room were dedicated to one objective, saving lives. For those who think of Colombia, or Iraq, or Afghanistan as places where people love war, this other side needs to shine through.

I was to have been sound asleep right now. The day had already been long, including a two-hour wild gallop on horseback down a 2,000 foot mountain (NOT something I recommend to those

who have not ridden a horse for the past several years.) The last jeep to leave the village of San Jose Apartadó was to depart at 6:00 pm and I had to catch up with it before it left town. If our 34-year-old patient did not make it to the hospital tonight she, and her baby attempting to be born, might not make it. Behind me were 10 men half-trotting, half-running down the same mountainside, taking turns carrying this pregnant woman in a hammock slung under a pole. All had volunteered at a moments notice and would return up the mountainside as soon as our jeep left. I made it to town just as the jeep was preparing to pull out. The driver waited for our patient, and amazingly, only minutes later the team portaging the woman arrived. Her blood pressure was now dangerously high, the reason for this frantic rush. Another hour and a half later we were in the hospital of Apartadó. The 23-year-old Franciscan Catholic nun and nurse who had requested my support in the hills above La Unión faithfully accompanied the patient until we were certain of her admission in the hospital. As we left the M.D. who was taking over her case noted how tranquil the night had been...

There are millions who wish an end for war in this country. There are hundreds of thousands who work in health, education and public works here who work for life-giving options in the midst of the worst of war. I know that they would express their great thanks to each of you, as do I, as you continue in a myriad of ways to stop the destruction, injury and death of war, and to bring an end to the evils of violence.

Now we have 4 more dead and over 30 injured from a bombing that will make almost no sense other than to see the cycle of violence continue. Tonight there is an increase in anger, and increase in pain, an increase in destruction. Yet, there are more Colombians who oppose to war than Colombians who participate in it. I hope to say the same of our people in the U.S.

It is time for sleep now. I can rest, recalling that we who strive for peace are the majority. We just need to make our voices heard and felt. My deepest thanks to each of you who strive to make this world a place of constructive growth rather than destructive harm.

Curt Wands

Please help stop military funds from the U.S. government to the Colombian government. Please help close the "School of the Americas."

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Suggested ways of support:

- Contact your political representative and request that ALL military aid to Colombia be ended
- Provide funds (tax deductible) to the Colombia Project of Concern America. Or for a list of medical supplies being collected contact: Concern America, PO Box 1790, Santa Ana, CA 92702; Tel: 714-953-8575; [concern@earthlink.net](mailto:concern@earthlink.net)
- Consider work with non-governmental and human rights agencies in the direct work in Colombia, or in countries with similar needs, or within the U.S. contact: Human Rights Watch/ Americas [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org), Witness for Peace [www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org), Concern America [www.concernamerica.org](http://www.concernamerica.org), Fellowship of Reconciliation [www.forusa.org](http://www.forusa.org), Amnesty International [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org), Latin America Working Group [www.lawg.org](http://www.lawg.org)
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