



Seventeen Years of Solitude

The 2016 delivery of a land restitution sentence brought little solace to the residents of Chengue, but when government agencies began delivering on orders, despair turned to joy and inspired a party in this forgotten village.



Chengueros dance at the first fiestas patronales in more than 20 years.

In Montes de María, violent factions perpetrated more than 50 massacres displacing more than 200,000 people between 2000 and 2008.

In June 2017, the National Land Agency delivered property titles for 27 properties of victims of the massacre in Chengue.

For the last seventeen years, residents of Chengue have found few reasons to dance. They fled their small village in the heart of the tropical hill country of northern Colombia after living through a bloody massacre perpetrated by a group of paramilitaries in 2001. That day, 60 uniformed killers ended the lives of 27 villagers with hammers, rocks, and machetes, and burned down dozens of houses. They told the survivors to never return, because from that point forward “Chengue would be gone forever.”

This year, hundreds of *Chengueros* proved their attackers wrong and organized the first *fiestas patronales* in more than 20 years. On the same plaza where their fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins were killed, residents danced to the local rhythms of *porro* and *gaita* music. The historic festivities—held in the first week of July—were colorful scenes of people dancing, women stirring pots of *sancocho* (turkey soup), poker-faced elders playing cards and drinking beer, excited children flipping marbles on the roads, and agile horseback riders on display.

The fiesta was the latest attempt by Chengue families to show one another that their former lives are not gone—rather, those two-day bacchanals that once made Chengue famous are back with the same pomp and pageantry of days past.

Chengue is located in the region known as Montes de María, where, following the demobilization of Colombia’s brutal paramilitary groups in 2008, the government began the slow process of land restitution and reparations for victims. A decade after the massacre, the government created the Land Restitution Unit (LRU), which has set out to recognize the land rights of victims, provide reparations, and allow victims to return to their homes and their lives. More than 10,000 people who survived the violence and were forced to leave their homes have since processed land restitution claims with the LRU.

By the time the LRU was created, the more than 300 *Chengueros* had nearly lost all hope for any justice related to the massacre, a tragedy that, in their eyes, seemed tethered to a corrupt and bureaucratic system. In 2006, a local judge determined that the police and the Colombian armed forces did not do their job to prevent the attack, awarding a settlement of more than US\$1 million. Eventually approximately 100 surviving families were paid around US\$10,000 each, a paltry sum compared to the amount the court originally awarded. Then In 2008, the man who had ordered the massacre, Juancho Dique, was sentenced to just eight years in prison as part of the government’s paramilitary demobilization program; He was released in 2015.

Since the massacre, 13 of approximately 100 families have returned to live in Chengue.



Path to Restitution

In 2012, the LRU started a land restitution case for 37 families from Chengue, but due to complicated land issues related to informal ownership and most of the land belonging to the state, the case hit a dead end and languished while hundreds more restitution cases were piled onto the understaffed agency.

“Chengue was a very complicated case, and for us to properly recognize the land rights of the victims, we first had to clear up issues with land use and ownership,” explains LRU social worker and case manager Elina Rivera. “Without establishing a route to bring this case to fruition, these victims would likely lose the chance to be able to pass their land on to the next generation or have the option to sell. In some cases, that link to their land might be lost forever.”

In 2014, USAID began working with the LRU in Montes de María to identify bottlenecks in the restitution process. To this end, USAID facilitated a “case clinic”—a multi-institutional platform including national agencies related to land administration, local government partners, and restitution judges—to work out the barriers that were holding up cases like Chengue.

“The case clinic methodology gave us the tools to get through a larger number of cases. By removing bottlenecks, we can provide better responses to the families who are expecting answers,” explains the LRU’s regional director in Montes de María, Álvaro Tapia Castelli.

In April 2016, a judge ruled in favor of 37 Chengue families, recognizing their land rights to more than 72 hectares of land as well as ordering government entities to undertake comprehensive reparations such as new houses, a paved road, and investments in agriculture. The sentence was yet another step in delivering justice to Chengue’s survivors and setting them on the path back to their village.

Immediately after the ruling, USAID facilitated the work of a post-ruling monitoring group that includes the Chengue Victims Association, local government leaders, the LRU, and relevant land agencies. Each month, the group follows up on progress in compliance with the judge’s orders.

In June 2017, the National Land Agency began delivering on its duty to formalize the parcels of land included in the sentence. The agency issued property titles for 27 lots, mostly located around the main road and the village square.

“We have been waiting a long time, and it’s clear that we will need the help of partners to get things done. Now we hope the momentum will continue and we will see our houses rebuilt,” says Jairo Barreto López, the main organizer of the festivities. “We didn’t organize this party for the sake of throwing a party. We did it to show everybody that Chengue did not die. Chengue is still alive.”



“This is the first time in nearly 17 years that we see the sun go down in Chengue. There are so many mixed feelings right now, people who want to cry and people who want to laugh.”

— Jairo Barreto López, President of the Chengue Victims Association