
Mario Paciolla: one year on, many questions surrounding his death remain unanswered

A year has passed since the death of Mario Paciolla on 15 July 2020. Since then, little progress has been made in the investigations into his death ([and alleged murder](#)), and the little that has been done is largely the result of the obstinacy of independent sources, of courageous journalists and activists, and a few opposition politicians. The 33-year-old aid worker from Naples engaged in a United Nations Development Programme for peacekeeping in one of the country's worst conflict zones, San Vicente del Caguán, in the south-eastern department of Caquetá. *One year on and without conclusive evidence, a number of indications suggest that his death, like many other deaths in this bloodstained country, was commissioned by "warlords."* With the aggravating circumstance, however, of not having been adequately "protected" by the "peacelords", or presumed to be such. **A "beacon of hope"**. While the incident remains shrouded in mystery, it is hoped that his much lauded efforts for peace have not been in vain. *The Episcopal Conference of Colombia, acting through the director of Social Pastoral Care and Caritas Secretariat, Msgr. Héctor Henao, contacted by SIR, has taken a position on the incident for the first time, without however addressing the subject of the ongoing investigations.* "First of all - said Msgr. Henao - we convey our sincere appreciation for the presence of volunteers and international organisations supporting the implementation of the peace deal between the national government and the FARC. The process calls for the support of the international community, especially in areas where guerrilla operations have been ongoing for decades. *San Vicente del Caguán is one of the areas where volunteers like Mario Paciolla are a beacon of hope.* In those areas, local communities are facing the challenges of a peace process, notably the resurgence and escalation of violence." Mario "died while providing a valuable service to highly vulnerable communities", remarked the director of Social Pastoral Care in Columbia. "Now the efforts and contribution of so many volunteers from distant corners of the world, such as Naples, in Italy, should be fully acknowledged, confident that their contribution will serve to consolidate a peaceful and fraternal society along the way." Although according to one of our anonymous sources, Mario's "friends" are now "hypocritically on their knees or scared", the local population is grateful for the efforts of the humanitarian aid worker, as we were told by **Mercedes Mejia**, a courageous environmental activist and lecturer at the University of Amazonia in San Vicente del Caguán: "A memorial service for Mario was held on the anniversary of his death, and a conference has been dedicated to him over the past few months. *If I had the opportunity to speak with his family, I would tell them that Colombia has not forgotten Paciolla's peace efforts.* It has been suggested that people here are idle and insensitive, but it's not true." **Oddities and unanswered questions.**

The many questions surrounding the death of Mario Paciolla remain unanswered.

"Oddities" were noted right from the start. First of all, the flat where Paciolla lived was immediately sanitised. After that, the UN mission unexpectedly left San Vicente, and Paciolla's death was hastily dismissed as suicide. Freelance investigative journalist Claudia Julieta Duque, author of several reportages in the newspaper El Espectador, has pieced together most of the inconsistencies and resolutely fought her way across a sea of silence and secrecy. *Moreover, Paciolla feared for his life and had bought a one-way plane ticket to Italy. But while a year has passed, no official answers have been provided by the authorities in charge.* **Gerney Calderón**, the "Defensor del pueblo" of Caquetá, speaking to SIR from San Vicente del Caguán, conceded that "he had no information", having only read the story in the press. **At first it was ascribed to the "bombardeo"**. *But who would have had an interest in assassinating Paciolla?* And why has the UN's handling of the matter been so shady, to say the least? *A first scenario leads to the "bombardeo": when FARC dissidents were killed in a bombing raid by the Colombian military in the same area of San Vicente in November 2019.* The

bombing resulted (deliberately, it was later ascertained) also in the death of children (eight confirmed, although it was later estimated that they were as many as 36). This horrifying episode (immediately denounced by SIR) led to the [resignation of the then Minister of Defence Botero](#), in the wake of a detailed complaint by Senator **Roy Barreras**, close to former President Santos. Contacted by phone, Barreras, who visited Italy in the past few months, told SIR that he firmly believes that investigations should start from there: "A year has passed since the death of Mario Paciolla and the case is still shrouded in mystery, with many unanswered questions", he said. "The government has yet to provide explanations, but I firmly believe that the Paciolla affair is linked to the 'bombardeo' and, in a broader sense, to Colombian military past." The Senator, who has publicly voiced his opinion in a [debate in the Senate](#), *referred to an intelligence report which mentions an Italian citizen working as a UN aid worker who allegedly leaked information about the bombing.* "This information is consistent with the case of the Italian aid worker", Barreras said. He continued: "What is happening in the Colombian army? Which connections have been established with other groups? The questions are many, as evidenced recently by the story of the retired officers and soldiers of Colombia's armed forces involved in the armed commando unit that assassinated Haiti's president. The Senator said he had no news of any "infiltration into the United Nations mission." Clearly the contribution of independent international observers on these issues would play an important role. "But President Duque has rejected the presence of international observers and the recommendations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)", said **Cristiano Morsolin**, Colombian human rights expert. More specifically, he rejected the Mission of the Special Monitoring Mechanism for Human Rights Issues of the IACHR tasked with verifying on the spot the implementation of the recommendations issued on July 7 by the IACHR. *Colombia's political establishment does not want European witnesses, it does not want international observers, because the policy of killings is closely connected to Colombia's model of barbarism, which is has become an exported model, as witnessed in Haiti.* **Environmental interests and conflicts.** According to an article in the online newspaper 'Ojo público', Mario Paciolla reportedly received a request for help from Christian Thompson, the controversial then head of the UN mission, four days before his death, noted Professor Mejia. Thompson himself, the same article says, was previously working for the US Agency for International Development in Colombia and private companies involved in mining projects, and more recently, Mercedes Mejia said, on oil development projects in the Putumayo department. The professor and activist has been on the front line of numerous environmental conflicts and against mining operations, as well as defending small landowners. Indeed, Mejia had met Paciolla in community councils of indigenous and campesino peoples, although not personally. *In these past years, the UN has not always stood by the local and indigenous populations.* In the past few months, hostilities mounted against the strategic alliance between the UN programme and GeoPark oil company for projects in the Putumayo region. However, this partnership was cancelled last May. "As I understood - said Fr **Angelo Casadei**, Consolata missionary in Solano, Caquetá (not far from the Caguán area): "the UN Mission is preparing to return to San Vicente." As for the situation surrounding the death of Paciolla, the missionary said that it was discussed with the brethren, who have a long-standing presence in the region, but that no conclusive information emerged: *"Colombia is an extremely complex country with a history marked by contradictions, conflicts, the persistent presence of the guerrilla fighters and, today, of Farc dissidents."* There have been countless deaths among human rights activists and former members of the guerrilla who supported the peace deal. One of them, Marco Tulio Salcedo, was interviewed by Father Casadei shortly before being killed. In short, Paciolla joins a long trail of deaths. But, for reasons that are still not entirely clear, his demise is reportedly highly disturbing and odd. (*) *journalist at "La vita del popolo"*

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