



community peacemaker teams

# Hope Reborn: El Magdalena Medio Resists Oblivion

# Letter from the editor

After thirty-five years of growth, learning and solidarity accompaniment, we began this year with a name change. Our shoes had become small for us, and we needed a new pair, we chose Community. "We chose the word Community because it reflects the diversity of our membership."

The experiences of many of our partners encounter are housed "in a state whose priorities," writes Teju Cole, "are inimical to priorities of ethics and justice." Community, in contrast, is the place where together we have been growing with our partners - we have been sharing stories, we have been united in the struggle, and worked together to untangle the legacies of colonialism and oppression - to counter the dehumanizing face of the state and its violence.

In this issue, you will find stories of our community. CPT's Care Coordinator, Melissa Berkey-Gerard, writes about why care is central to peace work. She reflects on the centrality of healing justice as a "framework to sustain ourselves as a community and individuals for the long haul." Members of the Palestine team and Colombia team share personal stories of what brought them to CPT and what they hope for in their work of growing in the community of peacebuilders. In Toronto, the imagery of community painted by Hannah Redekop, reporting about TISN's solidarity work, is one of protest and dissent

against a state that criminalizes unhoused folks. For CPT, community evokes "a sense of togetherness and solidarity with our partners" manifested by concrete political actions that unveil the cruelty of a state designed to profit off its people on the margins and a call for justice.

Community is also embodied in the convicted contributions you, our supporters, made. Your commitment to our mission, "building partnerships to transform violence and oppression," makes it possible for us to join our partners in working for peace with justice. Alicia Rynkowska spoke with a long-time supporter on why she and her partner decided to support CPT. We hope their story will inspire you as it has inspired us.

After a year of living with our new name, I'm convinced that the choice was right. This year, our new name, Community Peacemaker Teams, has allowed us to further recognize our journey of undoing oppressions. It has empowered us to deeply examine the systems of power and privilege within CPT that may not have allowed us to live into our activism and our commitment to collective and inclusive liberation.

As we move into the new year, we invite you to renew your commitment to collective liberation and community. Join us as we join Alice Walker in her declaration, "Activism is my rent for living on this planet."



In kindness,  
Caldwell Manners  
*Communications Coordinator*

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*A migrant cemetery cared for by families and friends of those who lost their lives at sea.*

# Unidentified bodies

*A prayer from the Aegean Migrant Solidarity Team*

Two shipwrecks occurred in early October in the Aegean Sea, and bodies continue to wash ashore. The current count is 19 deaths, but the total number of deaths is impossible to know. We cannot determine the number of survivors either, as the nature of arriving to shore is still fraught with danger: escaping the Coast Guard and police while trying to find access to asylum on the island.

Every day, thousands of people cross the dangerous waters of the Mediterranean Sea in search of a better future, and unfortunately, their journey often comes to an end when they lose their lives to the sea.

Bodies are lost, and no one looks for them; they are just numbers that have a burial date and a case number, nothing more. All people have a right to life and death. All people deserve the dignity of a burial and a recognition of their life. No one should be lost in the seas, in unknown places without a name and identity. They should have a choice for a better life in safety, and without borders, shipwrecks, and wars.

We pray for all those who are lost, and for all those who are preparing to begin their journey to a better future as well. We pray that borders will cease to exist and that safer roads will be created for a better future. ■

# Centering Care to Sustain Peace Workers

By Melissa Berkey-Gerard

*Our movements [organizations] themselves have to be healing, or there's no point to them. —Cara Page*

Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT, originally Christian Peacemaker Teams) works in areas of conflict around the world, in solidarity with those who are targeted by violence and oppression. CPT was founded thirty-five years ago by Anabaptist and other peace churches who heard the call of Jesus to actively work for peace as rigorously as the military has championed war. CPT is committed to building partnerships to transform violence and oppression in places such as Iraqi Kurdistan, Colombia, Palestine, the US/Mexico border, First Nations land in Canada/Turtle Island, and Greece.

As COVID-19 pandemic measures closed borders and halted international travel, CPT, as an international organization, paused to discern how best to continue or reimagine the work of accompanying communities that were under threat of violence. Many parts of the world went into a series of lockdowns, and violent and oppressive forces capitalized on pandemic measures as a cover to increase their violent acts against the people we partner with. By summer of 2020, despite some of our staff being unable to travel to rejoin their teams, we were able to resume CPT's work on the ground. In Palestine, for example, our team re-started physical accompaniment and presence with an all-Palestinian team for the first time in the twenty-five years CPT has worked in Al-Khalil/Hebron in the West Bank.

Even in pre-pandemic times, those of us working with CPT regularly encountered systemic oppression as we listened to the stories of those targeted by violence and supported their nonviolent resistance. Recognizing the impact of these experiences upon staff, CPT's Undoing Racism Coordinator Sylvia Morrison, along with others at CPT, began the work of helping us become a trauma-responsive organization. This meant understanding that our work may be traumatizing and trying to prevent that

trauma from becoming stuck, building up, and having a negative impact on us.

Over time we have built structures to support the well-being of CPT members, using the framework of Healing Justice to sustain ourselves as a community and individuals for the long haul. The Healing Justice practice grew out of the Southern United States social movements for racial justice and is defined by Cara Page and the Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective as follows:

*Healing justice is the practice of reimagining wholeness at the intersection of intergenerational trauma, current structures of oppression, and a generative and co-created future. We hold that joy and pleasure create possibility to be in right relationship with ourselves, each other, and the land. We strive to demystify medicine and healing, and to make them accessible to everyone. We believe that each person is an expert of their own experience, body and needs, and that it is necessary to address the roots of trauma and injustice for individual and collective transformation.<sup>1</sup>*

Healing justice is the liberating path we seek to follow and invite others into, that centers indigenous communities, people of color, and the LGBTQ community in healing from intergenerational trauma and current trauma. It is the practice of looking at wholeness and wellness imaginatively. It is more than just thinking about self-care or taking care of oneself at the expense of the group; instead, it recognizes that our movement for liberation MUST put healing and care at the center so that we can all stay motivated in our work and avoid burnout, quitting, or hurting each other. The COVID-19 pandemic can and has exacerbated trauma, so it has been important for CPT to give closer attention to strengthening structures and practices that mitigate trauma, build resilience, offer healing, and connect us with one another.

In times of crisis, this is one of our strongest assets—connection to one another. While the pandemic kept CPT members physically separated from one another and from many of our partners on the ground, we worked to promote and attend to the well-being of

all of our staff. Relationships offer joy, break us out of isolation, and invite others to compassionately witness what we are going through. Although we were only able to gather as an international community virtually, we began meeting weekly to ground and center ourselves spiritually and to check in on one another and offer support. We made space to collectively grieve the losses experienced during the pandemic. We held virtual “coffee hour” and shared life stories.

As the pandemic wore on, some of our workers began to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, pandemic fatigue, and vicarious trauma. We identified the need for psychoeducation and offered workshops on these symptoms for CPT members.

Even in non-pandemic times, we recognize the need to continuously offer space to process our experiences, both as teams and individuals. So when tensions run high because of stress, we invite space to name what is hard, to speak about the impact of oppression, and to heal as individuals. “I went through ups and downs from what I observed in the H2 area (controlled by Israeli military occupation), and one of the things that helped me to continue working was the system of care that we have,” reflected a Palestine team member. “We do check-in sessions monthly with coordinators, which reminds me of the care plan I should do for myself, not to mention other team care practices. Without this system of care, I couldn’t be able to work and have a normal life in a stress-and-dangers place we work in.”

We need space to ask for support from our teammates, to draw out the strength and courage that we see in each other. We need to remind each other of what keeps us hopeful, why we do this work, and what matters at the deepest part of our beings. We need to stop together and listen for the quiet signs of liberation that break through even during tremendous suffering. One of our frequent rituals is a practice of naming what connects us spiritually to our work and why we continue to do the hard work of collective liberation.

Through the concept of healing justice, we know that resisting and breaking apart systems of oppression is itself the most important factor in our resilience and care for our community. Our collective liberation comes through creating a world where all people are free. Every time we train people in Iraqi Kurdistan in the tactics of nonviolence or provide unarmed civilian protection to a social leader in Colombia, we strengthen the

worldwide resistance to military and armed forces of oppression.

With the majority of our field team members coming from the places where they serve, our CPT work has a new depth to it.<sup>2</sup> This also brings an increased risk of team members experiencing effects of trauma, as they are targeted by the same systemic oppression they are witnessing and documenting. For example, our Palestinian teammates are subject to the same checkpoints in Al-Khalil/Hebron that they monitor for human rights violations. Recently, I spent a few weeks with the team repeatedly witnessing Israeli soldiers with machine guns pointed at us requesting our ID cards and asking, “Do you have any weapons, guns, or knives, or anything sharp?” Every time, I was afraid the soldiers would mistake a cell phone for a gun or knife and that my teammates could lose their lives for this mistake. Similarly, in Colombia many Colombian social leaders are assassinated for standing up against armed actors. Our Colombian staff are not immune to these threats.

In recognition of this reality, CPT members who want to meet with mental health providers are matched with providers from their same background so they can receive culturally competent care in their native language. This is part of a larger effort to create even stronger structures that recognize the impact of systemic, continual oppression on our workers.

While CPT has always experienced the challenges of actively standing in solidarity against violence and oppression, the COVID-19 pandemic affected us deeply and inspired us to develop a more robust wellness approach. Though many of our connections are still virtual as a result of pandemic measures, we are finding each other. We are reminding each other of why we are here, sharing what keeps us hopeful, sharing songs of freedom and resistance. We join across time zones and light candles together, whisper our griefs, witness one another’s pain, and hold each other in the love that liberates. We remind one another about the world we are working for—the one in which everyone is free. ■

<sup>1</sup> *Allied Media Conference 2018, Healing Justice practice space and Healing Justice track coordinators, Detroit, MI.*

<sup>2</sup> *For several years, CPT has intentionally moved toward hiring local peacemakers for all teams.*

*This article was first published in Anabaptist Witness in October 2022..*

# Meeting Mary Ann and Remembering Walt

By Alicia Rynkowska

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of speaking with Mary Ann Holtz. Mary Ann is a Christian contemplative activist/educator, retired psychotherapist, longtime supporter of CPT and wife to the late Walt Davin, who participated in a CPT delegation to Palestine in 2003. I'd reached out to Mary Ann in October, after I learned CPT was part of her and Walt's legacy giving plan. I wanted to know how she came across our work and why she'd decided to support this peacemaking community.

While we were an ocean apart—me sitting in my living room in London, U.K. and Mary Ann in Florida, U.S., connecting via Zoom—it felt like we could have been sitting across the table from each other, chatting about CPT, the work of nonviolent peacemaking, and the relationships integral to our lives. From the outset, it became clear that Mary Ann's husband, Walt, was central to her story.

Walt passed away in 2015, and though he wasn't physically part of the conversation, his presence was palpable.

Mary Ann met Walt in 1985, while she was facilitating a six week workshop on Forgiveness. She was working as a mental health counselor and part of a Christian intentional peace and justice community. Walt was new in recovery from alcoholism and keen to explore some of the work the community was doing. It wasn't long before Walt was joining them in their weekly gatherings for study and prayer, and at the nearby General Electric nuclear bomb trigger plant, where they held weekly vigils. His commitment to prayer and peacemaking made an impression on Mary Ann and a year later, she was agreeing to be his support person at

an anti-nuke weekend in King's Bay, Georgia, where Walt committed to risk arrest during an action. That was the weekend they started dating and they were married six months later.

Mary Ann and Walt committed themselves to peacemaking and social justice, spending time with communities in Haiti and supporting their ongoing efforts for liberation: "It was not for us to go and bring Jesus to those 'poor people' or fix their lives. It was to go to learn and honor what they were already doing," Mary Ann told me. One of their trips to Haiti

took place during the coup years, when there was a heavy military presence: "It was pretty scary. On the second day we were there, we were being driven to a beach and on the way we saw a decapitated body. Oh my goodness. Their loved ones were too terrified to pick up the body in case they'd be targeted."

When Walt decided to apply for a delegation with CPT to Palestine in 2003, it was this experience in Haiti that became the basis for his application: *My first real experience with cross-cultural work was a trip Mary Ann and I took with the group Ministry of Money on a reverse mission to Haiti. We did some hands-on care of the sick and poor, but the true healing was in the hearts of the travelers. I found that I was a principal character in the parable of the Good Samaritan. I found that I was the thief. And the people of the world are poor because I beat and robbed them and left them on the side of the road. I now know that there's no peace without justice for the poor.*

Mary Ann described the impression the CPT delegation to Palestine made on Walt—those 10 days deepened Walt's commitment





to nonviolence. After returning home, he shared his stories and experiences in Palestine through a number of presentations, advocating for justice. And always, Mary Ann was part of these efforts: “The way we worked as partners is that I tend to be converted through reading. I don’t actually need to go somewhere. I get it in my heart, in my gut by reading. Walt was an action person, so it took going and doing. For the delegation, we did the prep together and then he went and did the delegation and came back with all of his stories. I put together some of the political, historical, religious context and he would share his experiences in a slide show. This is how we complemented each other.”

As Mary Ann shared about Walt and the peace and justice initiatives they took part in together, it was clear that their relationship was the kind that worked synchronistically with each other, that reflected a generative love that was shared with the communities they were a part of.

Their support of CPT was born out of this commitment to active nonviolence and following in the Way of Jesus: “I really want to support what Walt and I were both passionate

about—active nonviolence, transforming oppressions and partnering with those on the ground. And that’s one reason that I want to continue supporting CPT. I donate each year and have left a legacy gift because I really do think your work is passing it on to the next generations.”

As we came to the end of our conversation, we reflected some more on our life journeys—on what had brought us to this very moment, sitting and talking about peace and the work we’ve been a part of and continue to be a part of. Mary Ann shared a quote by Lila Watson that seemed to sum it up perfectly: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Meeting Mary Ann and remembering Walt was a reminder of why we call ourselves ‘Community Peacemaker Teams’—our name is a reflection of our rich and diverse membership and of this growing community of peacemakers, where our own stories, unique experiences and personal motivations serve to enrich this work. ■

BUILD DOORS, NOT WALLS  
Love your enemy  
Walt Davin CPT Team 03

## JOIN THE SEEDS. LEAVE A LEGACY GIFT.

The Seeds is a community of givers who are making peace and justice part of their lasting legacy. Planning a future gift to CPT is one of the most powerful actions you can take to build communities of justice who embody solidarity and collective liberation. A legacy commitment is an investment in work that will create a more just, peaceful and dignified world for generations to come.

A planned gift can take many forms, such as including CPT in your will or trust, or by naming CPT as a beneficiary of a retirement plan, life insurance policy or other financial account. You don’t need to part with assets now, and your plans can be changed as your needs change.

If you are ready to take the next step and join The Seeds, contact [legacy@cpt.org](mailto:legacy@cpt.org) or call +1-773-376-0550

You can also visit [cpt.org/donate/the-seeds](https://cpt.org/donate/the-seeds) for more information



# Shelter closures leave residents with no options for safe housing

By Hannah Redekop

*Toronto is closing pandemic-era hotel shelters without proper relocation processes, leaving residents stranded, in dangerous situations, while experiencing abuse at the hands of administrators.*

The city of Toronto is waging a war on the poor, carrying out direct violence and abuse against working-class and unhoused communities through policies and practices that continue to uphold colonial, carceral and racist structures. The CPT Turtle Island Solidarity Network (TISN), in coalition with several other organizers in Toronto, is mobilizing to hold the city accountable.

TISN was created in 2018 as a network of CPT reservists across Turtle Island mobilizing for Indigenous solidarity in a variety of different communities. TISN has sent accompaniment teams to Wet'suwet'en territory and Line 3 resistance camps and has been supporting Chich'il Bił Dagoteel (Oak Flat) and 1492 Land Back Lane. Most recently, Rachelle Friesen, CPT TISN's Coordinator, has been involved in anti-poverty organizing where she is based in Toronto.

At the core of Indigenous solidarity work is

decolonization. This is often understood as 'land back' and sovereignty from the residual colonial policies that exist in the economic, legal, and cultural aspects of governments today. But to fully achieve decolonization we must also dismantle capitalism, as the current class system is a driving force of oppression of many intersectional identities. As Métis academic and activist Howard Adams argues in *Prison of Grass*, Indigenous solidarity and anti-capitalist organizing must go hand in hand. CPT has found it essential to stand with folks who are unhoused and working-class people as a way to deconstruct the colonial system.

Therefore, CPT has been working alongside a coalition of organizers in Toronto resisting colonial policies and standing in solidarity with Indigenous people and folks who are unhoused. This work has included supporting encampments and organizing alongside residents who are living at shelter hotels.

To address housing needs during the pandemic, the city of Toronto opened up hotels as a way to provide unhoused folks with a safer option for shelter. Several hotels were repurposed for this use, but now—even as the pandemic is ongoing and infection numbers are rising—the city has chosen to shut down



Homes First, a charity organization running the Novotel shelter, has not been providing any information about residents' individualized relocation plans. Friesen has been advocating alongside residents experiencing this mistreatment. "Some of these relocations are happening at midnight; residents have received knocks on their door after midnight, and are told they have 30 minutes to pack up their stuff because they're being relocated," she commented. "They are not given the option to deny or refuse their relocation, because if residents choose the street instead of the relocation plan, they have nowhere to put

"It is completely unacceptable," says Friesen. "What we are seeing is a systematic criminalization of folks who are unhoused through the shelter system as an extension of the prison system. Folks staying at a shelter are forced to comply with unnecessary rules, and if they do not submit, they are forced onto the street as punishment." To move towards abolition, housing is imperative. ■



# From red hats to red jackets

When I was 16 years old my family inherited a piece of land from my grandfather. My family felt joy as they started building their dream home. But the land we inherited is located near one of the biggest Israeli settlements, east of al-Khalil (Hebron).

When my family started construction of our small house, I remember how happy we were that we could finally live together, with dignity. However, during the construction process, our dream did not last long when unexpected visitors from the Israeli authorities approached the construction site. They handed my father a 'stop construction order,' claiming that the construction was illegally built and must be stopped or demolished, like hundreds of other Palestinians houses that faced the same destiny due to the State policy.

I asked my parents about this demolition order and they said in a deep, sad tone that we will not be able to continue building the family home we dreamed of, as it might be demolished at any moment. My parents worked so hard and saved money to reach this moment, but could not risk the legal and economic consequences of continuing. I remember looking at my father's eyes as his tears fell onto the demolition order, soaking the paper. My mother cried and asked, "why?" and "where should we go? we don't have

money." I also started crying and began to collect our belongings in case they came to demolish the house.

Winter was approaching and we needed to secure the house, but the Israeli authorities returned and handed over another demolition warning. We spent the first winter in difficult conditions, with almost no windows and doors. The authority returned regularly to check on any changes and to count who and how many of us were living in the house.

Then the Israeli settlers started coming to the house daily, attacking us verbally and physically. On the first few days we were alone, until some foreigners with red hats came and introduced themselves as CPT. We welcomed them and were so pleased that people had come to support and stand with us. That moment was very special to the entire family.

The settlers continued attacking us for almost forty days and the CPT team remained in our house the whole period – they spent the nights in our home and did not leave us at all. We shared food together, our bedrooms, Ramadan special moments, and a fire that we made in front of the house – we became one family.

One night, a settler approached the house with an axe in hand, he tried to attack my father and my mother intervened to prevent





## Building Community

*“This Workshop saved my life. It helped me come to terms with my past. If I didn’t participate in it, I don’t think I would be here.”*

- a local female facilitator, previously trained by CPT

CPT Iraqi Kurdistan has been busy facilitating a number of Nonviolence workshops. The training provides an opportunity for participants to listen, understand and cooperate with one another, learning crucial building blocks for the practice of nonviolence.

By supporting our Nonviolence workshops, you are continuing the advancement and expansion of key nonviolence skills. Participants trained by CPT go on to facilitate further trainings across Iraqi Kurdistan.

***Give at [cpt.org](http://cpt.org)***

the attack. The settler contacted the police who came to arrest my mother, but my father would not allow the police to arrest her and instead the police arrested him. The CPT team remained close to the family in the absence of my father, protecting us.

On another night, settlers came and vandalized our agricultural farm planted with olives, grapes, almonds, and other seasonal crops. My family, together with CPT, re-planted the crops and other trees. A CPTer called Art Gish helped us closely and told my father that cultivating and planting is the best sign of life and hope. I will never forget the other CPTers at that time who were present in our house – Peggie Gish (Art’s wife), Dayyan, Pierre who is currently a member of the CPT Colombia team, as well as many others.

I experienced CPT’s enormous support, kindness and empowerment of my family. Because of them, we have remained in our home, although conditions are hard and we face threats every day. We learned how to live, love, hope, resist, adapt, trust and believe. I learned how to be a human being and started supporting people in my community by volunteering in local institutions, until I myself become a family member of CPT.

My first day with CPT was so special, emotional, and hard. I went to accompany children to school, protecting them from the ongoing clashes and possible attacks from Israeli soldiers. It was a challenging period for me and I questioned myself – how can I protect the students? I realized that my role enables me to empower students and their families. I need to continue and we need all to continue, because there are people who count on our presence. ■



# Hope Reborn: El Magdalena Medio Resists Oblivion

By Jhony Arango

As a child, one of my biggest questions was where the water from the stream that passed through my neighborhood went. I would ask my uncles, who always answered, “it reaches the sea.” I was distraught because I wanted to know where the corpses I watched float by would end up. The first time I saw one, it was a man, ready to go to work because he still had his backpack on. I remember it was terrifying, and I dreamed of this corpse lying in the ravine in my neighborhood for several days. For a while, I stopped looking at it.

After a few months, I started going to the ravine every day to see if there was a death because the violence in my neighborhood had worsened. In the 1990s, the ‘El Bosque’ neighborhood in Medellín became a stronghold for the ‘MP’: Popular Militias. I was around five years old, but I remember clearly the violence we suffered due to territorial disputes between armed groups.

One day I learned that the Medellín River flowed into the Magdalena River and I never imagined that my question about the dead bodies I saw every day would eventually lead me to The Grand River of the Magdalena, as the inhabitants of the Middle Magdalena region call it. It is a river that has witnessed the violence in Colombia; it has carried on its current the missing, mutilated, and murdered. It has been stained with blood from the war but is also a symbol of resistance, memory, and mourning.

I never thought that what I lived through in my neighborhood would be linked to the region where I am living today, in the Middle Magdalena region on the banks of the Magdalena River. I grew up in Medellín, known as the “little silver platter,” but it is more like lead: caught in our own tragic history of having once been the most dangerous city in the world.

I didn't want this as part of my life, to see dead people in the streets every day or to suffer the loss of a loved one who was left lying dead on a corner. I didn't want to feel

the pain of watching this war continue. So at 16, I began to think about noncompliance with obligatory military service. I didn't care that it was an obligation, a legal duty, or the legitimate army of the state.

After investigating and educating myself, my stance had a name: Conscientious Objection. It was the strangest term in the world, but this conviction would save me from being kidnapped in an army truck and sent to a municipality in the Middle Magdalena region (mainly to the Puerto Berrio battalion), as the fourth brigade was doing at the time in Medellín, taking young people from the neighborhoods and forcing them into military service. I declared myself a conscientious objector at the age of 17, and with the support of my family, friends, and objection group, I decided to disobey the mandate of war. I started the journey that would bring me to CPT Colombia.

I met the Popular Women's Organization (OFP for its acronym in Spanish) in 2003, as they arrived in Medellín. They were leading a caravan of more than 30 buses with women from the Ruta Pacífica (Peaceful Way), where we continued on to Bogotá for my first march. I was so excited! They held a symbol with a weapon crossed out, and we marched to the Plaza de Bolívar. There I knew this was bigger than I imagined: an admirable, non-violent resistance struggle in Colombia that has been going on for many decades and resists oblivion. I never thought I would be a part of it, but there I was.

And here I am now, a part of the CPT team. Questioning oppression, patriarchy, war, and militarism has brought me here. How do we respond in the midst of a context that proposes war? Well, we are here, a people committed to the values of life and to defend the fundamental principle of wanting to live in a country at peace.

I met CPT in 2019 and was very happy when I was selected. I knew I would be part of a great community that unites around the principles



*Jhony places signage announcing the presence of international accompaniers in a vehicle in the Northeast Antioquia region of Colombia.*

and actions of creative nonviolence. I wish I could share with you the many impressions I have had of the region, but for now, I will tell you it is a place where its inhabitants have built a culture of peace and resistance worthy of admiration. The communities that we accompany daily show us their ways of resisting war.

In September, I was shocked when I almost witnessed a murder returning home to the CPT house. I heard the shots. I was paralyzed for a moment, but I immediately went to take shelter. When I arrived at the corner of our street, there was a crowd surrounding the corpse. I did not want to see. When I was 17, I decided not to see more deaths or bodies left by violence. But I saw myself there, from behind, a child looking at a corpse and wondering where that body would end up.

I did not think I would find such a sharpened context of violence this year in Barrancabermeja, but confrontations between armed groups over territorial disputes have

increased. The Magdalena River continues to be a highway for drug trafficking, and many riverside communities continue to suffer the harshness of the war.

The communities continue to search for total peace. Just as the Middle Magdalena was a national pioneer in peacebuilding with the Peace Laboratory of the Middle Magdalena (a program of communities that rejected the armed conflict during the early 2000s) among many other expressions of resistance, it continues to be a significant place that will speak to the country as an example of dialogue and proposals that dignify life.

I am where I want to be, and thanks to CPT, I have been able to know and learn more. The child who refused military service feels happy today to be on the path he chose. It can be very painful, sad and sometimes frustrating, but it is a place where I can take action, show solidarity and accompany those who want to continue walking in the hope of a Magdalena Medio that resists oblivion. ■

# Independent Kurdish Journalist Describes State Repression

By Peter Morgan

“You don’t have any right to answer,” Ayub Ali Warte recounts the threat from the Asaish officer interrogating him. “If you speak, we will beat you.” From the safety of the CPT office, Ayub recalls his recent memories from deep inside the prison in the Asaish office in Benaslaw. He had seen the innards of this prison and had met its staff before. As a journalist, he is no stranger to threats or Erbil’s prisons.

Ayub Ali Warte is an independent journalist based in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and the home of the primary ruling party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Since 2010, he has worked with independent media outlets such as Estan and KNN with his stories exploring allegations of government corruption and investigations of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) efforts to target journalists. Unfortunately, his efforts to uncover and document injustices have brought Ayub into the harsh spotlight of the KDP and KRG security apparatuses. For his efforts, he has endured daily harassment, including three arrests, assaults and attempts to be ‘bought off’ with offers to work for politically aligned media agencies. His experiences offer an insight into conditions journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan face if they produce content critical of the local governing bodies.

**“Your work should not be honest; you would live freer.”**

Ayub arrived home on Saturday 6 August, a tired man. He had spent the morning at the mechanics and running errands and was eager to relax with his wife and three children. The preceding days were busy ones. Across the KRI, protests critical of the government had been announced for that weekend. Ayub was keen to know the public’s opinion of these upcoming demonstrations. He spent days attempting to interview people on Erbil’s streets, but most were afraid to talk.

Suddenly, there was a knock at his front door. He glimpsed some men outside his door. “I thought they were guests,” he recalled while preparing to welcome them into his home. Greeting them, Ayub reached out to shake hands with the new arrivals. Instantly, he was grabbed and dragged away from his home. He remembers hearing his wife screaming as he was bundled into the waiting vehicle.

Ayub stretches out his arms to us, displaying the marks on his wrists from where the knife gouged his skin as interrogators cut off his flex cuffs. “I was in that interrogation room for seven hours,” he explains, “the guard told me, ‘you have to stand while I interrogate you.’” In front of him, the interrogator pours through Ayub’s social media comments and message history. “There are a lot of files against you; we can put you in prison for 20 years.” One of the guards casually exclaimed, “We know you didn’t do anything.” The interrogation ends abruptly with a blindfold over his face, and a black bag pulled over his head.

The next day, the guards ushered Ayub into another interrogation room. This time, however, he was informed of his release on the condition he sign a blank sheet of paper. The implication was that the authorities could fill it in later with a fake confession or non-consensual agreement. Outside the room, a man approached him and asked, “Why don’t you love your country? Why don’t you work for our media?”

“My work is not critical. It is honest.” Ayub replied.

“Sometimes, your work should not be honest; you would live freer. So let it be the last time. We don’t want you to be arrested again,” the man warned.

**“Because I felt like it”**

Ayub surveils the street when he leaves his home. Constantly under threat of arrest, he assumes he is followed by security forces whenever he is in public now. Recently, while driving from Ranya to the Xoshna Valley, a black BMW pulled alongside his vehicle at



high speed. It then attempted to force Ayub's car off the road but quick thinking saved Ayub from serious harm.

Not long after, Ayub was crossing Easkan Street in Erbil with a friend. A dark car deliberately swerved towards both men with the explicit intention of causing harm. His friend quickly pulled him to safety.

The impunity with which crimes against journalists can occur was flaunted in August as Ayub drove across downtown Erbil. His vehicle was solidly rammed from behind by a darkened car. Shocked, Ayub queried the driver on why he had hit him. The man looked him dead in the eyes and dryly exclaimed, "because I felt like it."

### **Defamation as a tool**

Out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, Iraq ranks at 172. Journalism is a potentially dangerous and precarious profession in all areas of the country, especially the Kurdish Region of Iraq. In recent decades, the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders and a host of NGOs, including CPT, have expressed concerns for the welfare of the region's press. A report published by the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy documented 353 violations committed against 260 journalists and media organizations in KRI by government and political entities in 2021.

The tactics used to harass journalists range from physical harassment, abuse and 'creative' threats to arrests based on vaguely defined laws. For example, five Badinan prisoners were questionably convicted for "destabilizing the security and stability of the Kurdistan region" (Article 1, Law 21/2003 KRG) in 2021. Other journalists have been charged with 'insulting others' (Article 433, Iraqi Penal Code) and 'defamation' (Article 434, Iraqi Penal Code).

Ayub notes that pressure on him rapidly skyrocketed after he filed a report about a politically well-connected doctor in Erbil who allegedly raped two patients who were sisters. In the story, he attempted to raise awareness of sexual and gender-based violence in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, after publishing, the government-funded Syndicate of Journalists announced that a complaint had been filed against him.

"The police summoned me, but I was afraid to go alone. So the next day, I went with my lawyer. They arrested me." It was July 18, 2022. Ayub was charged with defamation under the 434 Defamation Law (Iraqi Penal Code) for his report on the physician.

Ayub recalls the allegations, still bewildered by them. The primary grievance had been using the doctor's image in his video report. "For the report, I needed to insert footage, so I checked on Arabic YouTube for generic footage of a doctor, with only his eyes visible," explains Ayub. Footage of an unknown YouTube doctor's face was taken and then blurred in editing. Identification would be impossible. Ayub also states that the doctor in this footage clearly shows no resemblance to the physician in his report.

While the evidence should have been clear to the authorities and observers, it highlights the use of defamation laws by authorities in KRI to pursue investigative journalists and activists. Sometimes, members of the major Kurdish political parties also bring civil defamation cases against journalists when there is no evidence for a criminal case.

### **"What should we do?"**

Ayub sees a murky future. No trial dates have yet been established for the cases against him, and the increasing pressure placed on his family has distressed Ayub the most.

In July, an unknown news source on Twitter reported that he had died. As a result, many people contacted his parents, asking them if they knew their son had died and offered their condolences. Ayub said, "For me, it was very painful. All of these actions are being utilized to pressure me."

His landlords in Erbil began receiving threats from undisclosed authorities, warning that they should evict him. Security forces had also lied to his neighbours, saying his trouble with the police was due to sexual harassment. He decided to move his family, but getting essential services connected proved difficult when they finally found a new home. The government tightly controls all services in Erbil, so it took weeks to get the electricity connected and the water delivery established. "There is a lot of pressure on my family, not just me. My kids' psychology is being impacted. My daughter yesterday said, 'What should we do?'"

CPT Iraqi Kurdistan is deeply concerned about the experiences and threats faced by Ayub Warte and those close to him. We call for his and his family's safety to be guaranteed. We call for KRG authorities to cease threats and investigate incidents of violence against Ayub. We appeal to the Kurdistan Regional Government to adhere to the values of honest and transparent judicial process and promises it has made to protect journalists and freedom of speech. ■

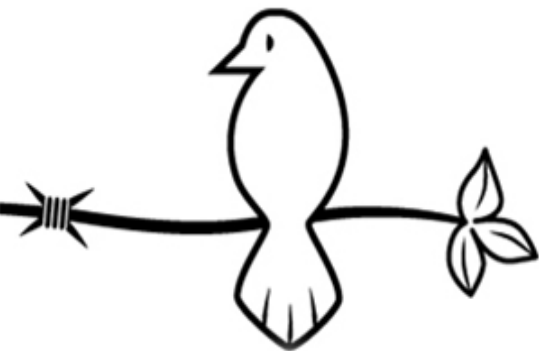


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## Local community comes together to support migrants

CPT's work is centred around community. Solidarity accompaniment cannot happen without partnership and collaboration. In this instance, CPT's partners, The Migrant Resource Center and CAME migrant shelter at the US/Mexico borderlands received an outpouring of support from the local community in Agua Prieta in a recent drive.

## Support CPT's solidarity accompaniment on the US/Mexico Borderlands by donating at [cpt.org](https://cpt.org)



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