

Sabrina Escobar: Do you consider the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a terrorist organization?

Juan Forero: It's not just a yes or no question at all. The FARC has been categorized and catalogued as a terrorist organization, not just by the United States, but also by Europe and the E.U. and so forth, because it commits terrorist acts, or it did when it was in conflict. The FARC demobilized and they are now a political party. The FARC did commit some assassinations, and bombings and various violent acts against civil society that would be characterized by any society as a terrorist action, but it is also a political organization now. Terrorists are often part of political organizations, like ISIS, which is also political -- I mean, they're fanatics and everything, but they're also political, and that's the situation with the FARC as well. So, the FARC has an end, a goal, and they work toward that goal, and they did rely on terrorist acts to send a message. It's a tactic. It depends a bit on what kind of target is hit and the time when that happened. There were different reasons for these acts. Just one of them comes to mind -- I think it was 2003 when the FARC bombed an upscale social club here called Club el Nogal and killed like 30 people. There were children there -- I think there were children among the dead -- and they just blew the place to smithereens. What the FARC said was that it had military targets inside of that building and that's why they were going after it. It was still a terrorist act, though; it was still an act that was carried out against unarmed civilians, and by any yardstick that would be a terrorist act. You definitely have a lot of that throughout the FARC's many years of warfare, but the FARC is also a guerrilla army, and they would engage the forces here -- whether it was the police or the army -- frequently in combat and overrun bases, and do the kinds of things you would do in combat. So, it's more than just a terrorist organization.

SE: How do you draw the line between guerrilla and terrorist?

JF: It depends on the organization. There have certainly been guerrilla groups that were not terrorist organizations, or even if they were catalogued as terrorist organizations, they have not relied on terrorist acts, but I think that is relatively rare. If you look at the history of Latin American guerrilla organizations, I would say that the vast majority of them committed terrorist acts. By that, I mean bombings, or killing civilians, or striking at the heart of the establishment, which for them is a strike against the military industrial complex or the enemy, but in most societies, this would be considered a terrorist act.

SE: How do you think reporting on the FARC has changed throughout the years?

JF: It depends on what news organization you're talking about. If you're talking about the vantage point of an American news organization, I think that it changes a lot, not just because the conflict has changed and the FARC itself has changed, but because journalism has changed. I've been here for 18 years. When I got here, it was a far different situation in Latin America and in Colombia. We covered FARC combat and daily events pretty regularly. We don't do that kind of stuff anymore, and we sort of step back and look at big stories, but I'm also so busy with other countries that I let a lot of things just pass. There's a lot of things that we don't do; I focus on

Venezuela a lot, and other countries where I also have to cover. I also oversee reporters and I'm an editor, so things change because of that too, but I think that there's an ebb and flow depending on many, many different things. It depends on what the United States is interested in, what readers want now -- I mean if readers want to read just about Donald Trump, then it doesn't matter how important some things are internationally, they get short shrift. In Latin America, Colombia is down a bit on the bar of interesting countries to editors and readers. We know this because we measure readers; countries like Venezuela and Mexico get tons more readers, and they in many ways are just more important these days, so that has an impact.

SE: You mentioned that your stories have changed, and now it's more about bigger stories. Does that mean more feature stories about the victims and their stories, enterprise stories, or other story formats?

JF: Yeah, definitely. Everything is more a feature story or enterprise story, which requires a lot of reporting and really good ideas. On the FARC, we really haven't done anything in a good long time. Not because there's not interesting stuff happening, or because I don't want to, but because of manpower issues. I'm busy with other things. We've got a huge crisis next door in Venezuela and I am trying to chip away at a longer, in-depth FARC story that I'm working on, and it is very much victim oriented. It lays out serious issues with the peace process, but it'll be one big story that we'll do. Maybe we'll get it out in a couple of months, and then maybe I won't do anything else on the FARC this year. Or maybe it'll be the middle of the year before I do something else, mainly because there's other things that I'm doing.

SE: What's your favorite way to report on something? For example, do you prefer features, do you prefer breaking-news stories, or making radio documentaries?

JF: like doing in-depth stories. Sometimes those are features, sometimes they're investigative stories. It kind of depends on the story. I like bigger stories that require a lot of components, a lot of moving parts, and making something that is really complex into sort of readable, understandable, compelling English. And I like big themes. Big themes in Colombia or in the other countries we cover. These could be any number of things. In Colombia, we've done stories that have delved into the ties between paramilitary gunmen and the establishment, which has been really superb and has given me a lot of satisfaction. We also do deep stories on the drug trade. In Venezuela we've done stuff on people, the spread of hunger there, lots on corruption, things of that nature. And then societal shifts of trends are also quite interesting. It's hard to say exactly what I like, because I am very much interested in all sorts of stories and themes, you know, it's not just one thing with me.

SE: When there was more breaking news about the attacks, like the 2003 attack on the social club, or even the kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt, was there a process you would go through to get the story? Was it hard to find sources?

JF: Well, I mean, the stories we're talking about are not hard stories to get. You don't need a special contact or anything like that -- they're big public events, and those that you mention in that era we covered immediately. You just drop everything and start working on it. Like with Ingrid Betancourt, I was there when that happened, I was in that region, so I did that story. When the explosion in the club in Bogota happened, I was in Venezuela, so I got on a plane immediately and came back. It just depends. If big things happened, you would just do it.

SE: You wrote a couple of stories on victims, such as the one on rape victims in the early 2000s. How did you get in touch with those victims -- did they find you to tell you their stories, or did you actively search for them?

JF: To clarify, those weren't FARC victims; those were victims of the paramilitaries. I wanted to do the story on the use of rape by combatants in war, so I contacted investigators who work on this. I don't remember who now, it was a while ago, but there is an organization who works on that in the government if I'm not mistaken. But I wanted to find a really small town where this occurred, and where people would be open to talking and where it had affected deeply the whole fabric of the community. If it's a big city, it's not going to affect the whole fabric of the community. And so, I found this town and I just went there. I think I had a contact there, who helped me, but I don't remember. Generally, that story wasn't really hard to do, it was just about getting there and spending some time with these women. They were all very open and willing and able and interested in talking to me.

SE: Do you usually set any ethical limitations, as in protecting anonymity or mentioning details about people's trauma, when you publish victims' stories?

JF: Well sure, there's respect for their story and their privacy. If they don't want to talk then you leave them alone. If they want to talk, then you talk to them and you set parameters and so forth. In the case of these women, they all wanted to talk and to tell me everything. They wanted their names in the paper. We discussed it, and it was a minute-long discussion. It wasn't any more than that; these women wanted people to know what happened to them. So, there was no issue about that. There really wasn't much of an obstacle to it. I thought it would be that way, it didn't really surprise me. I think victims oftentimes want to talk, and share their story, and let you know what has happened to them, and that was definitely the case with these people.

SE: How do you think working at an American organization is different from working for a Colombian news organization?

JF: I think a Colombian newspaper or outlet will be covering things pretty regularly. For them, there's news every single day. Sometimes there are new developments by the hour, and they cover small snippets and such -- sometimes big stories, of course. We don't generally look for stories like that. We take the snippets in and everything, but we work on bigger, broader projects. Like right now, there's problems with the peace process of all kinds. Well, the newspapers here would write stories about every little problem, every little scandal, every little development,

every outrage -- we wouldn't do that. We would keep all that in mind, and in the future, do a big story that says, "the peace process is in trouble, these are all the things that are happening." That's kind of the difference.

SE: Do you think Colombia has generally been accepting of foreign reporters, or have you ever faced censure from the government?

JF: Yeah, I think it is accepting. I don't think that is a huge issue here like it would be in some other regions of the world. We run into obstacles and there are many people who don't want stuff to come out, but overall, I don't think you're going to run into the same kind of serious problems you might run into in other parts of the world.

SE: You mentioned that censorship is not a "huge issue" with being a foreign reporter in Colombia. What, in your opinion, is the main issue or problem?

JF: Here in Colombia, to really deeply cover this country, you're going to be invariably covering issues involving rampant corruption and official malfeasance. This is also a country where there's drug trafficking, drug trafficking violence, drug-related violence -- and a lot of powerful people are involved in that stuff. They don't want reporters to know that. You have to be careful when you cover some of those issues. And you're also going to run into a lot of folks who aren't going to be very helpful, you know, helping you get out those kinds of stories. There's a lot of things here that are not easy to report on, for a variety of different reasons, so I would say that those are the difficult things here. There isn't an official censorship, just to make that clear, but clearly there are other issues and other problems that arise that make reporting here hard.

SE: Have you ever feared for your safety while reporting on terrorist organizations, or any other groups?

JF: Feared for my life sounds a little bit dramatic. I've been places where there was combat, and I've been in towns where the guerrillas were attacking, and I was there and in the thick of it, and anything could happen. But your adrenaline is running high, and you're getting the story, and you're not really thinking all that much about it. I think that there were a couple situations where messages got back to me from the FARC that they were unhappy about a story, but it never really led me to change anything. And of course, I did a lot of stuff about the paramilitaries here, who were really sort of the nastiest group of them all, and a lot of stuff about the crimes they committed. They were always dangerous for reporters, but, it's sad to say, I think that all these organizations are political and they also sort of draw a line with foreign reporters in a sense, because the real people who are in danger here are Colombian reporters. Particularly those from small towns and remote regions, places that are kind of forgotten and in effect they're kind of forgotten.

SE: How does reporting on terrorism affect reporters psychologically?

JF: I think it depends on the reporter and on what people had seen. I think somebody who's been covering conflict and terrorism day in day out for a long time can be affected. People are affected by that -- PTSD -- that's something that a lot of reporters who have covered combat suffer from. That isn't really the case with me, because I don't just do that, I do many other things and I'm not out in the trenches covering attacks on people. I mean, I've seen a lot since I've been here, and I've seen combat and all that stuff, but it isn't what I really focus on. And Colombia's far different from other parts of the world like Iraq, Syria, other places, where they're destroyed and stuff.

SE: What prompted you to change publications – from the New York Times, to the Washington Post, to the wall Street Journal? How did that affect your coverage of different conflicts in Colombia throughout time?

JF: I changed jobs because when I was at the New York Times -- when you were a foreign correspondent at the times -- it's not a definite posting, you have to move on after like 4-5 years, and they were talking to me about some other possible jobs, but I really wanted to stay in Colombia, and I just felt like I needed to change. I wanted to try something new. I didn't just go to the Washington Post, I had sort of a dual job, which was working for NPR and the Post, and I got to learn how to do sort of in-depth radio documentaries, stuff like that, which was fantastic, so that's why I did it -- partly to stay, partly to just do something new, job wise. In the end the NPR thing ended like 6 years later, something like that, and I stuck with the Post until the start of 2014, when the Wall Street Journal came to me and was offering me a position, and it was a pretty good job and I thought that it would be a good move for me to go to the Journal, because it's a far bigger paper, and I was going to be a director for several other reporters, and, you know, much more responsibility and all that stuff, so I decided to make that change. I mean, in terms of coverage, I don't know how it changed, you know, I mean I've done my thing, things have changed because, you know, interest change. Interests change in terms of what editors want and the news itself changes, so you adapt to what is out there, what needs to be covered, what maybe is being covered too much so you don't cover it any more. It just depends on a lot of different things, different factors. I will say that there's a shift from the Post to the Journal, because the Journal -- we're very interested in some other countries, like Venezuela, that keeps me quite busy, and I go to Brazil, and all that. We also have sort of an economic tilt for coverage, so we look for business and economy type stories a little bit more than we did in the other papers.

SE: Speaking of trends, from your perspective as a journalist, has the Colombian people's opinion of the FARC been stable throughout the years?

JF: Yeah, they hate the FARC, and that's been stable. That hasn't changed at all.

SE: Does the FARC have certain followers who are propelling their political integration? Is it a very small minority?

JF: No, I wouldn't say that. I mean we just had an election, and they got something like 80,000 votes, which is just nothing. So no, I mean the FARC has very little support in this country. Polls show that they're largely reviled and that really hasn't changed. I mean, I would say that probably what we can glean from Sunday's elections, they're disliked as a political party as much as they were disliked as guerrillas.