

## Hidden stories: Survivors of organized crime

*Though organized crime is the subject of numerous treaties, traditionally it has not been central to conversations about international humanitarian law (IHL) and the conduct and regulation of armed conflict. There is currently no unanimity as to the criteria to be included so that IHL applies to criminal groups. The articles in this issue of the Review explore how organized crime and the groups that carry it out can be, should be and in fact are regulated through the international legal framework governing armed conflict and other situations of violence.*

*While the objective of this issue is to clarify the role of criminal groups in armed conflicts and how IHL applies to them, the collection of testimonies presented below has no such aim. This sole purpose of this compilation of testimonies is to give a voice to the victims of organized crime so that their stories, which are usually hidden and silenced, can shed new light on the short- and long-term effects of organized crime on those who suffer from it. These stories provide unique insights into the personal and societal impacts of organized crime, as well as the ways in which victims cope with and resist these criminal networks.*

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### **Keila's return**

The clock on the bus leaving Tapachula migrants' centre was showing midnight. On board, thirty-seven Hondurans, including Keila, were being deported from various

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parts of Mexico. Most of the migrants on the bus were men, but the seat next to Keila was occupied by Dania, another young Honduran woman. The young woman was sweating profusely and complaining of intense abdominal pain. She was running a fever. Twice, Keila tried to inform the driver about the girl sitting beside her, but she was ignored both times. The driver was intent on making sure that the bus continued its journey.

Her worry increased as time passed, so Keila spoke again to the driver, who replied: “I can’t stop. I have to keep to the timetable, and that means reaching Honduras by the early hours of the morning.”

The bus continued its journey through the dark. Suddenly Keila screamed for help as the young woman beside her started bleeding from between her legs. The driver ignored it and carried on. It did not take long for Dania to pass out from the loss of blood. She was suffering a miscarriage.

In a burst of solidarity, and out of anger at his lack of compassion, the other migrants shouted at the driver and threatened him. The driver finally stopped somewhere in the darkness, right in the middle of the México 200 motorway.

About an hour later, a Mexican Red Cross ambulance arrived. Keila offered to accompany Dania to the nearest hospital but was told that she had to stay on the bus with the other migrants. Dania was then taken away in the ambulance, alone.

Keila and the other migrants continued their journey to Honduras. She remembers the driver saying, “It’s still going to take us about ten hours to get to Honduras.”

Today, Keila wonders what happened to that young woman. Did she survive, despite losing so much blood? Did she get back to Honduras alive?

Keila, on her side, did get back to Honduras, but she was not able to return to her home.

More than a year ago, Keila’s husband was taken away by men posing as police officers. There were six of them, all masked and wearing blue uniforms. It was about six in the morning, and they had forced their way into Keila’s home. “We’ve got a few outstanding issues to resolve with your husband”, Keila remembers them shouting, before she was locked with her three children in the bathroom. “Don’t speak and don’t shout, or you’ll die with him”, they threatened.

The men threw her husband to the ground and beat him. Then, they dragged him out of the house and put him in a black van with no number plates.

A few hours later, still in a state of shock, Keila went to the local police station, located in a dangerous part of San Pedro Sula. She asked if her husband was being held there. The police officer she spoke with informed her that they had not carried out any operations that night. They also had no one in the police station’s only cell. “They just found a dead body, though. Go and see if it’s him”, the officer suggested.

It was.

The so-called police officers – apparently members of a non-State armed group – had tortured Keila’s husband before they killed him. Keila’s

brother-in-law attended the forensic examination with her. Her husband was unrecognizable; the only way they managed to identify him was from a scar on his arm. His face had to be rebuilt before he could be given a dignified wake and funeral.

Before all this happened, Keila's husband had been paying a "war tax" to the group that controlled their neighbourhood. He drove a lorry, transporting goods for firms and private customers. Each month, he was paying 5,000 lempiras (about \$250) in protection money. One day his lorry was damaged, and he fell a couple of months behind with his payments.

From that moment on, he received constant threats. He was told that if he did not pay up, something would happen to him and his family. He became ill and depressed. Keila noticed the change; her husband became reserved, and he hardly slept. He was no longer the hard-working, dedicated and cheerful father and husband he had been. Keila tried to ignore the situation as much as she could, to prevent her worry and distress from affecting their children – two little girls and a boy.

After her husband's murder, Keila stayed in the same neighbourhood with her children, for lack of other options.

"I had nowhere else to go – and two weeks after my husband's murder, it was my turn to receive threats", she recalls, visibly upset. "One night, two men arrived on a motorbike taxi and came into the house. I didn't know what they were looking for. I just ran out with my daughters and my son."

That night, she stayed with family members nearby. When she went back home the following week, she found threatening notes on her door reading "It's your turn next", "If you say anything, you're dead", and "We won't leave any loose ends". She realized that her tormentors had got hold of her mobile number when she started receiving calls instead of notes. During one of those calls, she was given twenty-four hours to leave her home or they would kill her, her children, and the rest of her family.

"I didn't think twice", she says. "I left the neighbourhood the following day."

When she left home for good, Keila was wearing just a white blouse, beige shorts and a pair of plastic sandals. She was only carrying a few clothes for her children. She left the neighbourhood with no clear destination in mind; her only aim was for her and her family to avoid meeting the same fate as her husband.

Keila finally decided that she would emigrate to the United States and leave her children with relatives – but she was stopped before she reached her destination. She only got as far as Tapachula, Mexico, where she was detained. She was held in a migrants' centre for three days before being sent back by the migration authorities without being able to apply for any kind of protection. When she returned to Honduras, she went back to live with her children and the rest of her family in the interior of the country, far from the threats and dangers of the city.

Now located in a house in the middle of the forest, Keila sleeps with her children in a small wooden room. They all share one double bed and are slotted together like the pieces of a jigsaw. Some nights, the girls have nightmares about the strangers who haunted them in their previous house. They wake up and ask their mother who these people were.

“Life’s not easy here in the countryside”, explains Keila. “There’s no work, no hospitals. You have to travel a long way to find food, and the school’s a long way away. But at least we’re left in peace.”



Keila in her new house.

## Michelita's prayer

I once had a friend whose mummy was poor. Criminals were pressuring her. So, her mummy decided to become a “wetback”. It was hard to say goodbye, but she knew that God was with her. Her daughter was so sad that even her grades at school started to go down. She cried and prayed to God for her mummy to come home. She was also worried about the stories she heard of migrants dying of thirst, hunger, heat or cold, or being bitten by animals. The funny part of this story is that because her mummy didn't know what the immigration people looked like, they caught her and, thanks to God, she came home safe and sound, and everyone was happy to see her alive.

Michel is a slender 8-year-old girl. She wears her hair in a ponytail, tied up with a Minnie Mouse hair band. Michel is cheerful and eloquent, and one of the best pupils in her class. Her brown eyes light up every time she greets her mother with a hug at the entrance of her school.

Every August, the government holds an “irregular migration prevention week”. This year, the teacher had asked the children to write a letter as part of a class assignment. For Michelita, as her friends call her, this was a painful exercise. Not so long ago, she had been separated from her mother for over a month.

It all started when her mother, Ángela, had become the subject of extortion and regular attacks on the little family shop. Ángela had a kiosk near a popular high school in San Pedro Sula. Business was good, and she was making enough for Michelita to attend a private bilingual school and learn English.

One dreadful day, Ángela received a visit from “El Chino” (“the Chinaman”). El Chino was a 21-year-old man whom Ángela had known since he was little. He had recently joined one of the armed gangs that control the neighbourhoods of San Pedro Sula.

He entered the shop and said awkwardly, “I want to talk to you. I've been told to ask you to sell... some stuff... in your shop.”

“What kind of stuff?”, Ángela asked, with a mixture of surprise and anger.

El Chino, this young man who as a little boy had come to her kiosk to buy sweets, was “making her an offer she couldn't refuse”. He wanted her to sell drugs in her shop. The profits would go to the group, but they would give Ángela a small percentage.

Ángela refused. As El Chino left and the door shut, she burst into tears.

After that day, the shop was attacked several times. Ángela regularly saw masked men hanging around. Sales fell drastically, and she got into debt. She and her family had to sell everything, including some video game devices, a drinks cooler and a couple of football tables. The whole family then had to move to another neighbourhood.

But violence continued in their new home. Two men broke into the house and robbed Ángela's 18-year-old sister Karla at gunpoint. Karla has mobility problems because she had polio as a child.

"They turned up in the middle of the afternoon", recalls Karla. "They pointed a black pistol at me and took my mobile phone and the headphones I was using to listen to music."

After this, Ángela decided to move again to another neighbourhood – somewhere more peaceful, yet still affordable. "But the landlady of the house refused to sign the lease when she heard we'd suffered extortion and attacks by armed groups", she explains.

Overwhelmed and helpless, Ángela decided to emigrate, in order to find some way of covering her debts and paying for Michelita's bilingual school.

Michelita's classmate recalls, "I prayed to God that the coyotes would not eat her mummy."

"I too prayed every night while mummy was away", says Michelita. "Apart from the coyotes, I was afraid of the intense cold at night, the heat and the dehydration in the desert, and the crocodiles in the Rio Bravo that they told us about at school."

During irregular migration prevention week, the children heard lots of stories at school about the various dangers, including the coyotes that attack people, along the route towards the United States. The teachers told the children these stories to put them off irregular migration.

Her mother's absence had affected Michelita's performance at school. "Before all this happened, Michel had always had good grades", says Ángela. "At least 90%."

"My grades went down to average, to 70%, in three subjects – even in science, which is my favourite", Michel tells us.

Ángela asks, "Why is science your favourite subject?"

"Because I want to be a doctor when I grow up, so I can heal people who are hurt", Michel replies, giving her mother a hug.

In Mexico, Ángela did not find a safe place to rebuild her life. She was sent back from a migrants' centre in Mexico a few months ago.

Michelita is happy to have her back. She says her prayers have been answered. Her grades have improved, and she has regained her place on the class honour roll. The family has moved to the outskirts of San Pedro Sula. They have managed to obtain a small plot of land by their own means, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is providing support so they can afford somewhere to live.

"We've always dreamt of owning our own home. Now we have that, we're hoping to start our lives again", says Ángela as she holds her daughter's hand and thanks her for her prayers.



## No quarantine and no respite from violence in the midst of COVID-19

COVID-19 has made it harder for people to earn a living and for victims of violence to find effective protection. The ICRC has been supporting Judith and Tania, two mothers who have been suffering from violence, in their relocation efforts through its assistance programme for people displaced by violence. Both Judith and Tania have been taking part in an ICRC-supported mask-making project, which has given them employment and enabled them to survive and to cope with their situation, albeit temporarily. These are their stories.

### Judith

Judith worked as a seamstress in her home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. As a mother of two sons, her income was only enough to allow her and her family to survive. Like Keila's family, Judith also had to pay a "war tax" to an armed gang.

Just when she was expecting a third child, Judith got behind on her payments. This led to an unwelcome visit from the armed gang that ended in a beating. Her then-partner intervened, and he was injured as well. The gang gave them just a few days to leave. Her partner decided to leave on his own for another part of the country, so Judith was left alone, pregnant and with two young children.

Judith's children often asked her why these people were persecuting them and why their father had abandoned them. She did not know what to say, and was feeling overwhelmed. "Sometimes I felt like ending it all", she recalls.

As a single mother, Judith was struggling to balance her own mental health with the challenges that her sons were facing. She tried to reintegrate and restart their lives in another part of the country, in the face of displacement and a pandemic.

Judith and her family received mental health support from the ICRC. "The psychosocial support enabled us to cope with the situation and heal the open wounds", she explains. "I smile every time I see my boys in the morning. Today, I can say that I'm enjoying life again."

### Tania

Tania is a single mother living in Honduras. She has two small daughters and had to flee from one part of the country to another. She has had to move on more than one occasion, in constant fear of being found by armed groups. Tania was forced to abandon her home and then her husband after he was badly beaten. He was a truck driver and had to emigrate because of threats and extortion.

For the time being, Tania and her little girls are safe, far away from danger, with the support of the ICRC. For Tania, keeping the kitchen well stocked is important in a pandemic, but the most important thing is to feel safe, even behind several gates. When she goes out to work, she leaves her daughters with a



neighbour. Although they do not leave the house, the girls find ways of playing and using their imagination, so they can forget the gates and the barriers around them.

Carolina, the oldest girl, is 10 years old. She goes up on the roof to see the people and vehicles passing by, but especially to get some fresh air and play hide-and-seek with her little sister, who is one and a half years old.

COVID-19 has added a supplementary challenge to the displacement that was already making life difficult for Tania and her daughters. “My biggest worry is how to make sure Carolina can keep up with her distance learning”, she explains. “I have to make sure I always have enough credit and internet access, so she doesn’t miss any lessons. And right now, unemployment is high, and incomes are low.”

For the time being, Tania has a job in a mask-making workshop. “It’s enough to feed the girls”, she says. “That’s all I need”.

## Sandra

When Sandra utters the name of her son, Daniel, her voice breaks. Daniel, the loving young man who organized football tournaments in his neighbourhood. Daniel, the boy who loved eating *baleadas*<sup>1</sup> and *pollo chuco*,<sup>2</sup> and who called home every day. Daniel, the boy who wanted to go to the United States to find better economic opportunities. Daniel, the young Honduran man who was shot dead in Mexico.

“Losing a child is something I wouldn’t wish on anyone”, Sandra says. “There are no words to describe how you feel. It’s like having something ripped out of your insides.”

Daniel had received threats from armed groups. For two years and eight months he lived in hiding, leaving home very early every morning and returning after midnight – until even this strategy failed to protect him.

Sandra smiles when she remembers her son. “He was a hyperactive boy; he was very loving too, but that was just his way of being”, she recalls. “He was a good boy. He gave me lots of headaches, but lots of happiness too. He helped lots of people in the community.”

## Alba

Alba’s body feels the pain of the death of her son, who was barely 18. Losing him has worsened her illnesses. She has diabetes and kidney problems; her whole body is affected.

Alba remembers that it was 8.45 a.m. She was just finishing breakfast when she received a call from the hospital. Her son was there. He had been shot several times, and had not survived. With her son gone, something died inside of her,

1 A type of tortilla.

2 A popular Honduran chicken dish.



Sandra holds a photo of her son Daniel.



Some of Daniel's personal items, photos and school certificates.

and her life changed forever. “I’ve suffered many illnesses because of this, and it’s affected the entire family”, she says.

Ten years have passed. Alba says that she can now talk more calmly about what happened, but the pain and the effects remain. She is sitting next to her mother, Mrs Máxima, who was like a mother to the young man, as many grandmothers are to their grandchildren. Alba remembers that her son used to cook and that his culinary inventions were delicious.

“It took me years to accept his death”, she recalls. “It’s the kind of pain you can’t put into words. How could you? There are no words to express this pain, this anger, everything you feel... there are no words that could express everything you go through.”

Alba remembers her son as loving. “He was a very handsome boy, and I’m not just saying that because he was my son. He was very intelligent, very loving, very special. He used to look at me sideways and say, ‘Lie down, mum. I’m going to rub your shins. I’m going to feed you.’ He wasn’t so good at studying, it wasn’t his thing, but if you told him where to go he would find his way. Eventually he said he did want to study – he wanted to be a chef.”



## **A community together: Health and education in Apopa**

“My daughter doesn’t go out. Not just because of the pandemic, but because it simply isn’t safe.”

Ana is a 9-year-old girl. She grew up in an area of El Salvador affected by violence. She is used to her mother’s fear that something bad will happen to her. She lives without enough space for recreation, and with nowhere to run or play safely with other children.

“Not going out to play affects every aspect of children’s lives”, explains Lorena, Ana’s mother. “They speed up emotionally and become more rebellious. When you’re confined, you imagine all sorts of things. Children need to be playing together, burning calories. Getting out to play motivates them, and right now they’re lacking that motivation.”

Violence has many consequences, and not only the obvious ones such as death and injury. Violence weakens the fabric of the community and affects mental health, which in turn causes fear and anxiety and limits development.

After holding workshops to find out what the communities needed, the ICRC started working with the Salvadorean Red Cross Society. They focused on a community in Apopa, which included 1,300 families. By doing so, they were hoping to strengthen the social fabric and community interactions, and to improve community life.

“You provide the material, and we provide the labour, along with the town council”, explains Hugo, one of the community leaders. He is talking about the infrastructure projects that have been launched to improve living conditions in the area. The scheme has been agreed with local residents, who are managing and implementing it with the ICRC’s support.

The work addresses issues that the community has identified as most urgent, following a consultation process initiated by the ICRC and the Salvadorean Red Cross Society. This process was essential to ensuring that the project reflects the needs and opinions of the community. As well as identifying needs, the community has committed to taking an active part in the construction work. This ensures that they feel a sense of ownership and are the agents of the change that is taking place.

“We’re going to improve the community centre, to create a safe place to meet up”, Hugo continues. “We’re going to flatten this area” – he points to a mountain of sand and grass – “and create a park for the children, with a wall around it so that balls don’t get lost. And finally, we’re going to create a walkway, so the children can go to school safely. The existing walkway is really dangerous.”

In the centre of the community, far away from the boundaries with other neighbourhoods and armed groups, an outdoor sports area will be created where children and young people – who make up over half the population of the neighbourhood – can play basketball, football and volleyball.

“This is a priority because the children have no safe spaces”, says the community association’s sports coordinator. “The existing facility lies at the boundary of our area, near other groups. It’s difficult for the children to run away when shooting starts.” She also explains that once the sports area is finished, they will set up a neighbourhood football academy.

All the new facilities will have ramps, to make them accessible to people with disabilities, those with limited mobility and older people. “The idea is to create spaces of togetherness that help us to live better, that give us joy”, says Hugo, who is well aware that joining forces is better than working individually.

There are plans for local artists to paint a mural at the sports ground in order to make the area more attractive, reflect the community's aspirations and give it a sense of ownership.

Another project that the community has prioritized is a pedestrian walkway to connect the neighbourhood with the local school situated in the adjacent neighbourhood. The quickest route for now is the main road, where there are often clashes between armed groups. The only alternative route crosses open ground; this route is safer, in that it is not a battleground between armed groups, but it becomes boggy when it rains, and the children have to cross a river with steep banks, so there is a danger of slipping or falling. Nonetheless, this route is the best way to avoid violence on the way to school.

"It will be a relief to have a footbridge on this route", says a mother. "The older children will even be able to go to school on their own." This type of project improves access to education and helps to prevent children and young people from dropping out of school.



Violence is also preventing people from obtaining health care in many localities. Not only is there a lack of medical facilities, but ambulances are often unable to get through in an emergency. The ICRC has responded by providing community first-aid training, enabling communities to provide emergency treatment.

The ICRC and the Salvadorean Red Cross Society also intend to set up a health committee made up of first responders. This will enable neighbours to help each other and receive medical care.

Delivering first aid in the community could save many lives. The best example of this is Gabriel, a nurse who supports the community when there are health emergencies such as heart attacks, falls or strokes, which are usually caused by violence.

“When I saw young people getting shot, I realized I had to do something”, Gabriel says. “I learned first aid, and then I began purchasing supplies and put together my own first-aid kit so I could provide care to my community. If it’s very serious we evacuate the person. Otherwise, I take care of them myself. The important thing is to be able to deal with emergencies, whether they’re caused by violence or something else, such as a heart attack or a fall.

“I had to stitch up one guy’s thyroid without anaesthesia, ‘Rambo-style’, because there are a lot of lymph nodes there and I didn’t dare anaesthetize him. I told him to breathe in and he just held on. I put in four stitches and managed to help him.”



As well as providing first-aid training for the community, the aim is to establish links with the nearest Community Health Unit so that relationships and channels of communication can be created, enabling the community to express their needs and take advantage of the health services. “Medical days” have been set up as part of the project, at the initiative of the Ministry of Health, bringing health services to the community. On these days, people can see a doctor, get vaccinated or obtain medicines.

Alongside the creation of the community health committee and medical teams, there have been efforts to raise awareness of how important it is to respect health personnel and facilities, and to highlight that any threat to health services is a threat to the whole community.

## Renata

“Day by day we work to bring this school up to a high standard”, says Renata Bersot. “It’s a hard job: there are obstacles in the way, and violence is one of them. It affects students as they come and go, for one thing. A student who lives in an atmosphere of violence every day is not a calm student. Very often, school is the calmest environment they experience outside their family.”

Renata is a mother, a teacher and the principal of a school with a thousand pupils between 6 and 15 years old. She must deal with armed violence on a daily basis; every day, armed violence directly impacts access to the school. Renata lives in the same area in which the school is located, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, so she also feels the impact of violence in her own daily life.

“I came here to bring my children up in peace and quiet, as this used to be a quiet neighbourhood”, she recalls. “Over the years it has turned into a violent one. We’re black, we’re poor, we live in an area where everything is very difficult and we have to keep to the straight and narrow, as there are different paths to choose from, and all these paths have consequences.”

For seven years, Renata has been the principal of Paulo Mendes Campos Municipal School (Integrated Centre for Public Education 318) in Saracuruna, Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro. Now she sees that all this dedication has borne fruit.

“We’ve succeeded in earning respect from the community”, she says, with affection in her voice. “I think that people seeing me here, and knowing I belong to the same place, makes things a lot easier for me when I’m talking to parents, dealing with a father or a mother. Even though I’m the school principal, I think they see me as an equal.

“If you asked me if my journey has been a happy one, I’d say yes, it has. I really love working in education, and I love being in a public school. Do I feel completely fulfilled? No. I say that because of the losses we’ve had over the years. They make you feel you’ve failed along the way, both as a school and as a person. I feel we must take our share of the blame, as a society. And here I feel a failure in a way for not having taken enough care of those children who landed here. Those children grow up, and at some point, they’re lost to violence. We go looking for them, we stage an intervention, but they’re not able to turn back. And then later we get the news: ‘They’ve killed so-and-so.’ That’s awful, really awful. It’s one of the worst moments imaginable. And you pick yourself up, you wipe away your tears, and you just get on with it. That’s how it is.”

Renata, who has been teaching since 1992, says she has already experienced several brutal situations where armed violence has impacted the lives of families and communities. “It’s very hard to pull a young person away from violence”, she

explains. “And the mother gets worn out. She cries, you know. One day a mother came to me and said, ‘Renata, I can’t do it.’ And then you cry with that mother because she really can’t do it. And she blames herself, but it’s not her fault.”

Renata needs to find strength and motivation every day in order to carry on with her commitment to all the students and families in the school community. “What motivates me are the children”, she says. “I get pretty tired, but it’s them, you know. I believe things will work out. They didn’t work out well for one, but for others they will”.

Renata has been trained in the Safer Access to Essential Public Services methodology (see below), which she regards as an important tool for ensuring that students can access school. Since the training, she and the other education professionals have become better able to spot signs of risk or crisis. This helps the whole school community in deciding what to do and taking action in times of need. “Thanks to the training, we’ve gotten good at spotting if something different is going on, and we know we need to use this or that particular tool.”





A safer school means calmer students. “I’ve noticed that here in our school they feel safe, which is great”, Renata says. “If they need to leave early, they don’t want to: they want to stay on at school. They feel good in the schoolyard, they feel good in the school. For them, the school is a benchmark of safety.”

Despite the impacts of violence on the school environment, Renata believes that education is transformative. Speaking about it, she becomes emotional: “Somewhere along the way, something went right. And that’s why I keep going. I’m sorry I’m getting upset, but I can’t talk about education without feeling emotional. I feel so deeply about education.”

## Safer Access to Essential Public Services

The Safer Access to Essential Public Services methodology is designed to prevent, reduce and mitigate the consequences of a community’s exposure to situations of armed violence.

The Safer Access Framework (SAF) draws on the ICRC’s internal guidelines and protocols, which are based both on the organization’s extensive experience of working in situations of armed conflict and armed violence over the world, and on the values shared by all its staff. It was developed to enable the ICRC to carry out its humanitarian activities with the least risk to all concerned. The bases and recommendations of the SAF methodology, which are adapted to the real-life situation of Brazil’s essential public services, take into account the particular aspects of the various contexts and scenarios of armed violence, focusing on the different situations of both the professionals providing the services and the people they cater for.

Honed collaboratively over time, with ongoing contributions and active participation from its partner organizations, the SAF is continually improving its methodology in order to respond with strategies uniquely tailored to people’s needs.