

Deep inside armed conflicts as civilians

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In 1992, some volunteers from the “**Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII**” tried to reach refugee camps in Croatia, challenged and shocked by the Yugoslavia conflict that was raging a few hundred kilometers from Italy, and motivated by the desire not to let war victims alone.

They succeeded, and the major discovery was that **it's possible to enter and live in a war, even as foreign and unarmed civilians.**

Then they began to spend periods in refugee camps and discovered another very important thing: **unarmed civilians are more and more the major victims of today's war**, they cannot even run away, they are the most defenseless, **so they must be the protagonists of the conflict resolution.**

Italian youth and elderly volunteers began to spend their holidays with the refugees. Soon they realized that was not enough.

They organized a permanent presence, at the beginning only with the Croatian side, later with the Serbians and Bosnians too.

This led to a third great discovery: **war creates victims on all sides of the conflict, fear, pain... and one great desire for Peace.**

War, lived from inside, no longer appeared so simple, that is, good and right on one side and bad and wrong on the other. War is much more complex and in order to understand it, it is necessary to live in it.

From inside everything was more complex but it was also extremely clear that **only the power of love, truth, and nonviolence could demolish the mechanisms of hatred and destruction:** in this way the Nonviolent Peace Corps of the Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, called **Operazione Colomba** was born.

What follows is the nonviolent experience built in 24 years of life in armed conflict, **sharing life with the victims of the conflict, operating simultaneously on different sides of the conflict and on several levels, supporting the daily needs of people, but also promoting political actions and meetings between local (religious and civil) and international institutions, protection of people in danger and under threat,** actions of violence denounce, promotion and defense of **Human Rights**, always working in network and maintaining a dialogue with any faction or group.

All that is realized by people who want to get through with their life that the **nonviolence is the only way to get a true Peace, based on truth, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.**

We firmly believed that, **by living with the victims of war, unexpected paths towards peace can start:** day by day, living with people under siege, in shacks or tents, without electricity or running water, sharing the same poor and dangerous conditions that all the civilians in war are forced to live with, under continuous armed attacks. Volunteers do it to create concrete spaces of reconciliation and peace, through neutral and

international presence, which acts as a deterrent to the use of violence, and by means of nonviolent actions. Since 1992, Operazione Colomba has been experiencing interventions in different wars through a nonviolent, disarmed and disarming way, such as **Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugoslavia (1992 – 1997), Albania (1997 and from 2009 to present), Sierra Leone (1997), Kosovo – Albania – Macedonia (1998 – 2000), East Timor – Indonesia (1999), Chiapas – Mexico (1998 – 2002), Chechnya – Russia (2000 – 2001), Democratic Republic of the Congo (2001 and 2013), Palestine – Gaza Strip (2002 – 2003), Palestine – West Bank and Israel (2004 to present), Darfur – Sudan (2008), Colombia (2008 to present), Lebanon/Syria (2014 to present).**

It's been present in different contests but with the same basic features:

- **Nonviolence:** it is an active and creative strength which comes into life through various actions such as interposition, accompaniment, mediation, advocacy, protection, reconciliation and much more
- **Sharing life:** volunteers share their lives with the victims (that means difficulties and risks) of any part of the conflict, no matter the ethnic group, religion or political view or any other difference.
- **Large people involvement:** the few requirements to be a volunteer are: the will to live in a nonviolent way, the ability to live in a group, to be of age and finally to take part in the training course.

An example of extraordinary results: the South Hebron Hills Popular Committee nonviolent struggle

Thanks first of all to the South Hebron Hills shepherds nonviolent choice and to the Operazione Colomba volunteers accompaniment something is changing positively.

Nonviolence is not just a theory, is concrete, effective and brings results that improve the lives of people.

Thanks to this nonviolent choice the civil community of the village of At-Tuwani continues to exist and live within and despite the armed conflict, and in addition it has achieved, over the last 10 years: a public school, paved roads, electric power service, a master plan with permission to build new houses, connection to running water, a medical clinic, a kindergarten, and latest a new mosque.

Furthermore people of the whole area have a greater sense of security, thanks to the permanent presence of Italian volunteers. They have therefore continued their daily activities (sometimes taking back portions of land which was previously lost) and some families could go back to live in the villages of the area, while people all round are continuing to flee because of violence.