

# LET THE CHILDREN LIVE!



**A Christian charity of last resort for children from the streets and shanty-towns of Colombia**



**Registered Office:**

**Let The Children Live! 2, Roberts Road, Doncaster, South Yorkshire, DN4 0JW  
Charitable Company limited by guarantee registered in England No. 07140869**

## **A charity of Last Resort whose aim is that the forgotten children of Colombia may have life; life in all its fulness.**

Let The Children Live! is a charity that works in Colombia with children from the streets and shanty-towns of the city of Medellín. These children were once called 'the disposable ones' and although that name is no longer used they are still at high social risk from the violence that they experience in the streets and shanty-towns of cities such as Medellín. Most of the danger in the shanty-towns comes from the many gangs ( or bandas ) that control them. Let The Children Live! is at present working with 320 very vulnerable boys and girls in this city. For most of them it is their last hope. Their ages range from babies to teenagers and they are often unloved and unwanted; even beaten, robbed, raped and sometimes murdered. By the rest of the world, they are either unknown or forgotten. The charity, which was founded by Fr Peter Walters, aims to safeguard the lives of these children from the poverty and violence of the streets and shanty-towns, and to make their lives worth living by giving them love, education and a future.

### **Greetings from Medellín, Colombia!**



## Newsletter/Update

### A hero dog, a drug-fuelled hunt – and how four children survived 40 days in the jungle

Ed Cumming and Matthew Charles tell the story of the perilous search for the siblings lost in the Colombian rainforest.

#### *Unfolding of a jungle miracle*

From disaster to an extraordinary rescue

#### **May 1**

Magdalena Mucutuy and her four children board a Cessna in Araracuara for a 220-mile flight to San José del Guaviare to meet Manuel Ranoque, the father of the two youngest.



The plane suffers engine failure just before 7.30am and disappears off the radar, crashing deep in the jungle. Magdalena is severely injured.

#### **May 5**

Magdalena dies and Lesly, 13, and her brothers Soleiny, 9, Tien, 4, and baby Cristin set off into the jungle. The siblings survive by eating cassava flour from the plane and using their knowledge of forest fruits.

#### **May 15**

Rescuers find the plane with the body of the pilot and two other adults.

## **May 16**

A massive search begins, dubbed Operación Esperanza – Operation Hope. More than 100 soldiers are deployed with sniffer dogs.

## **May 17**

Search efforts intensify after rescuers discover a shelter built with sticks, leading them to believe there are survivors.

## **May 18**



Photos released by the military show scissors, shoes and a baby's bottle in the children's makeshift shelter.

## **May 26**

On the day the smallest child, Cristin, turns one, the search team spends hours singing 'Happy Birthday' on megaphones in the jungle.

## **June 9**

A sniffer dog finds the siblings three miles from the plane. They are airlifted by helicopter to a hospital in Bogota, malnourished but well. Thanks Be To God!

Wilson, the sniffer dog, finally picked up the scent on the night of June 9. The team of four indigenous rescuers were exhausted. Along with a team of crack Colombian commandos, they had been combing the jungle for six weeks. They had used every trick in the book, even taking ayahuasca as part of the ritual. But their quarry eluded them still. This is one of the most hostile environments on Earth, a land of snakes, jaguars, mosquitos, sweltering heat and 100 per cent humidity.

But the six-year old Belgian shepherd led his handlers on, through thick Amazonian rainforest, deep in impenetrable and rain-soaked undergrowth. At last, the group came to a small clearing in the jungle. There they found who they were looking for: four children from the



Huitoto indigenous group: Lesly, 13, Soleiny, 9, Tien, 4, and Cristin, 1. The plane the children had been travelling in, on a flight from Araracuara Airport to San José del Guaviare, had crashed in the jungle in Caqueta province on May 1, an unthinkable 40 days earlier. And yet although the four were dehydrated, malnourished and suffering from insect bites, all four were very much alive. It

was, as the rescuers shouted into their short-wave radios to transmit the news, “Miracle! Miracle! Miracle



The good news brought the country to a halt. Nobody had expected the children to be alive.

The four had been with their mother, a family friend, and the pilot in a Cessna 206 light aircraft. They were flying to meet Manuel Ranoque, the father of two of the children, an indigenous mayor in the remote Amazonas region in southern Colombia. He had decided to move his family away from their home on an indigenous reserve, near a town called Araracuara, after receiving threats from local guerilla groups,

who were recruiting children under the threat of violence.

For decades, Colombia has been riven by violence relating to the drugs trade. Farc (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the most prominent of these groups, agreed to lay down its arms in 2016, but the areas where they were most active, particularly more faraway parts of the country, remain lawless. Locals near Araracuara have been targeted by a group called the Carolina Ramirez Front, led by former Farc members.

“I was very scared the children would be recruited,” Ranoque told the New York Times earlier this week, adding that the groups “have no respect – they are capable of recruiting a child as young as two”.

What Ranoque could not have anticipated was the alternative. Early on May 1, an hour or so after they had taken off, the single engine of the Cessna failed, and the plane crashed into the undergrowth.

The family friend and the pilot are believed to have been killed instantly. The children’s mother, Magdalena Mucutuy, 33, was badly injured but it seems – although reports vary – that she was, initially, still alive. Speaking outside the hospital earlier this week, Ranoque said Lesly, his eldest daughter, had told him that her mother had urged her children to leave her behind so that they might live.



*The wrecked Cessna*

“[Lesly’s] mother was alive for four days,” he said. “Before she died, she told them something like, ‘You guys get out of here. You guys are going to see the kind of man your dad is, and he’s going to show you the same kind of great love that I have shown you’.”

There was already a suggestion that resilience ran in the family: Ranoque said his sister had once survived for a month in the jungle. His children would need that same resilience now.

At 7.34 am local time, the pilot made a distress call reporting engine failure, and radio contact was lost shortly after. The Colombian Air Force sent out craft to search the area – a Basler BT-67 and Bell Huey helicopter. This precipitated a manhunt, initially involving 70 members of the army. A search team found the plane on May 16 in a thick patch of the rainforest and recovered the bodies of the three adults but the children were nowhere to be found.

As General Pedro Sanchez, commander of Operation Hope said, “the jungle is arduous. Trees can grow 100 feet or taller, blocking light and making it hard to see. Visibility is never more than 20 metres, so it was really hard. It is so easy to get lost and lose a trail.”

To assist in the search, President Gustavo Petro appealed to indigenous communities. Members of the Siona, Nasa, Huitoto, Sikuani, Misak, Murui and Koreguaje peoples were flown down to help.

“Some did not eat animals for 40 days as an offering to the forest,” Flavio Yepes, a member of the Sikuani community, told The Guardian. “Not even a snake until the kids appeared.”

A breakthrough reportedly came on June 8, after a ceremony in which some of the Murui took yagé, a psychoactive drug.

“Some people become anacondas during these ceremonies, some tigers, others large birds,” Yepes said. “I don’t know what animals the Murui transformed into that night but it is what brought them to circle back towards the crash site, where they found the kids.”

### ***Wilson the dog***

“If it weren’t for our ancestral understanding of the forest – its medicinal properties, its life and its spirits – we would not have found

the kids when we did,” Acosta said.

Meanwhile the army used a loudspeaker to blast out recordings by the children’s grandmother, urging the children to stay put, in their native tongue. They dropped parcels of food.

Despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation, the rescuers believed the children to be alive. Throughout May, they had found clues that indicated the children had survived the crash: a half-eaten passion fruit, water bottles, nappies. A hair tie and a makeshift shelter. Footprints, too.

But then, these were not the pampered offspring of the West, but indigenous children. As Luis Acosta, the national co-ordinator of the Indigenous Guard explained, their remarkable resilience was innate. “From the age of 13 we assume adult roles,” he told reporters. “We have to, in the territory. In life, we have to do it this way.”

“My granddaughter is brave and intelligent,” Narciso Mucutuy told the Telegraph. “She knows the jungle – we, as indigenous people, know the jungle. She knew she had to get her siblings to safety.”

Led by Lesly, the children salvaged what they could from the wreckage of the aircraft: a bag of cassava flour and some canned food.

Eventually, they decided to leave the crash site, to look for more food. “They survived on berries, on fruit,” said Mucutuy. “Lesly knew what was safe to eat and what was poisonous. It’s in our blood. But we teach them this from a very young age. She rationed the milk for the little one. When the milk ran out, she replaced it with water.

“The children cried. They were cold, they were hungry and they were in shock. The eldest tore some of the fabric from the clothes of their mum. They used it to wrap themselves up... and I think to be close to her.”

Eventually, however, the children stopped trekking. “They were exhausted. The eldest was weak. She was concerned. She was losing her memory and seeing things. They just couldn’t walk any more. They thought they were going to die. They prepared to die. But thankfully, that’s when they were found.”



Lesly had her one-year-old sister in her arms. The five-year-old was huddled under a mosquito net. "I'm hungry," said Lesly as she ran towards Nicolas Ordonez Gomes, one of the rescue workers.

"My mother is dead," said one of the boys. The rescuers tried to change the subject, saying that their grandmother was waiting for them. The boy asked for some bread and sausage. They were tired, hungry, and had lost their mother, but they were alive.

"I felt an overwhelming peace – peace we had found them, and peace that we hadn't failed them," says Sanchez. "But I also felt such happiness – it consumed me. I haven't stopped smiling since."

The children are now in hospital in Bogotá, flown there by helicopter having been picked up by army commandos using drop-lines. They are weak but reported to be on the mend. But the national euphoria – as if Colombia had scored a goal at the World Cup – was short-lived.

At the time, the joyful news united Left and Right in Colombia's often a fractious political environment. The President, Gustavo Petro, said the rescue was "magical", while Ivan Duque, the conservative who was president before him, called it a "miracle". Even the Carolina Ramirez Front issued a statement expressing their happiness.

"Like all Colombians, we rejoice that the four surviving children of the plane crash [in] May have been found alive," it said.

After a few days of blanket coverage of the rescue, however, the news has returned to the usual political strife. And the Mucurtys, mourning their daughter, are seeking custody of the children.

For the rescuers, meanwhile, there remains one vital missing thread. Amid the chaos of the discovery, Wilson, the dog who helped find the children, vanished into the Amazonian undergrowth. Having spent six weeks searching for the children, the rescue team must now locate their canine team member, who himself was emaciated from the weeks of pawing his way through the jungle.

"Wilson [the dog] is part of our family," says Sanchez. "Some of my men owe him his life as a result of previous operations, we won't turn our backs on him. We never leave a man behind so we are still looking for him."

It seems like a lost cause. Luckily, Operation Hope, with its team of dedicated commandos and indigenous searchers, specialises in those.

## Our shop in Walsingham

Our shop in Walsingham is now managed by Mrs Jackie Seals who lives in the village. Her husband Brian enjoys giving a hand and can often be found in the shop chatting with customers and pottering around doing all the background jobs that are so important.



**Susan Poole,  
former Manageress,  
handing over the shop keys to  
Jackie Seals.**

**Outside the shop at  
38 High Street,  
Walsingham,  
Norfolk.**



**Handmade goods for sale....**

Because **Let The Children Live!** has so few staff, we are not always able to reply to messages immediately: but we do normally manage to do so within a few days. If you have sent us a message that required a reply, but have not received one, the chances are that our reply has been caught by your spam filter. The address from which we reply may well *not* be the same as the one to which you sent your message, so your computer may have treated it as junk mail. We sometimes waste a great deal of time writing replies which do not get through because of this problem. So if you are waiting for a reply from us, **please check your junk folder every day**. And, of course, if there is no reply there, please send us another message or contact us by telephone.

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