

Cristo Perez offers insights on indigenous spirituality and the harm of landmines in Colombia

by [Nubia Rojas](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

Cristo Perez wishes he had listened to the bird. If he had heeded its warning, he might not have stepped on a land mine that day three years ago.

Birdsong is an omen to Perez, a 32-year-old father of eight and member of the U'wa people, whose ancestral territory is in northeastern Colombia.

After decades of civil war, Colombia has the second highest number of land mine incidents worldwide. Arauca, the area where Perez lives, is located on a guerrilla supply route and is littered with antipersonnel mines and unexploded devices. Though a peace agreement was signed in November, the deadly land mines remain.

Last year alone, 23 people died in land mine accidents in the country. The number of those who have lifelong injuries is much higher.

In an indigenous community such as the U'wa, where life is based on cooperation, disability affects the entire group.

"I cannot work as I did before," Perez said. "I help my wife to clean the house, to cook, to peel the plantain. . . . I miss working together with others in the field, but that cannot be."

Now Perez supports his community by being a member of the board of the Association of Antipersonnel Mine Survivors Fighting for Dignity and Peace, or ASODIGPAZ, a Lutheran World Federation partner organization.

Perez has helped the LWF to better understand the impact of mine incidents on the spiritual and daily life of indigenous communities, as well as the physical and psychological damage to the survivors.

After Perez stepped on a mine, a doctor ordered his leg amputated, but Perez called for a traditional healer instead.

“When the U’wa contract a Western disease, we send for a Western doctor, but if he cannot heal the person, it means that there is a traditional disease, and we call the cacique, the highest spiritual authority,” Perez said.

The cacique was able to heal the damaged leg, but Perez remains almost blind in his right eye and can’t hear in his right ear.

“I lost the memory and knowledge I had, and there is the fear and suffering which were caused when I stepped on the mine,” he said.

In U’wa understanding, the accident had disturbed the spiritual guardians of the mountain and caused an injury medicine could not cure.

“White people do not believe in such things, but we think that when, for example, a snake bites us, or, for that matter, we step on a mine, the fear of the person attracts an evil spirit,” he said. “We then have to call an indigenous doctor to heal us.”

With the assistance of people such as Perez, LWF adapted its workshops to better meet the needs of indigenous survivors, using visual materials more suited to their way of learning.

“I’ve learned a lot about those explosive devices,” Perez said. “I have met people who have had accidents even more serious than mine, and we all support each other. All members of ASODIGPAZ, both indigenous and nonindigenous, are fighting for our rights, for compensation and that people with disabilities caused by land mine accidents can access the pension that allows us to move forward with our lives.” —Lutheran World Federation