

# At the edge of darkness

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**PARTNERS** – Fernando Larzabal talks with Colombian missionary José Miguel López about the progress of the Gospel in the “Alhuatan” village they are visiting. José Miguel is among a handful of national missionaries with whom the Larzabals partner in order to bring the Gospel to Colombia’s indigenous tribes. (IMB PHOTO)

**S**weat dripped from Dut’s short, slender body as she hollowed out a grave in the floor of the Colombian rain forest. Only minutes earlier the “Nu” Indian woman had given birth to her ninth child, a boy, but didn’t like what she saw. The baby’s head was misshapen, pointed — a temporary defect doctors would recognize as the result of an intense labor.

But there were no doctors here. Dut was ignorant and alone, save for several of her children who had tagged along with their mother as she ventured into the bush that day.

They watched as Dut laid their brother’s tiny body in a shallow hole and began to cover him with dirt. The newborn shrieked in protest, his arms and legs struggling against the handfuls of cool, damp soil that pressed against his skin.

His cries weakened as a wave of earth washed across his face, followed by another and another.

Abruptly, the jungle fell silent. Without pause Dut stood, brushed the caked blood and grime from her hands and turned toward home.

## Suprising aftermath to a chilling confession

“Lee Rojas” felt sick to her stomach. Watching her own 2-year-old daughter playing with friends in the Nu village, the Colombian missionary struggled to comprehend the cruelty described in Dut’s macabre confession. Even worse, she learned that Dut had also buried four other children alive — one simply because it was a twin (the Nu believe the smaller twin is possessed by evil spirits).

What Lee didn’t know was that the Lord would transform Dut’s life. Through Lee’s witness, Dut would soon be one of the first Nu to begin a relationship with Jesus Christ. It’s a glimpse of the way God is making His Son’s name known among Colombia’s indigenous, more than 100 native tribes scattered across a nation nearly twice the size of Texas.



Spearheading that effort are Southern Baptist missionaries Fernando and Brenda Larzabal. Born in Argentina, Fernando began his ministry career as a missionary pilot. He met Brenda, a teacher from Saranac, Mich., on a mission trip to Belize. Four boys and 22 years of marriage later, the Larzabals now serve with the International Mission Board, charged with mobilizing the Colombian church for the sake of bringing the Gospel to every indigenous tribe.

Lee and her husband, “John,” are among a growing number of Colombian missionaries who’ve accepted that call. It’s a big job, and there’s no one-size-fits-all strategy. Whether “Buntere,” “Tatitu” or “Yuspaga,” each tribe is as unique as its name, with a distinct language, culture and worldview.

### 60-plus people groups with no witness

What they have in common is their need for Christ. Of the 100-plus indigenous tribes, only nine are considered “evangelized.” More than 60 others are without any Gospel witness. That means no known believers and no evangelical churches. Instead, most tribes are animists — spirit-worshippers who live in fear of failing to appease gods they neither know nor love.

“This is the very edge of darkness,” Fernando says. “The overwhelming need of these people is to be delivered from the fear of Satan. ... Without God there is slavery. Without Christ there is fear and that’s what they breathe day in and day out.”

The Rojas know firsthand what that kind of fear can do. They’ve lived among the Nu for nearly 10 years and have often watched Nu families go hungry, sometimes for days, because they were too afraid of evil spirits to go hunting in the jungle.

“It’s like a different world,” Lee says. “The Nu live very primitively.”

There’s no electricity or running water in Nu vil-



**STANDING ALONE** – A boy plays on a road in the “Alhuatan” village of “Camacho.” This is one of the few indigenous communities in Colombia that Southern Baptist missionaries Fernando and Brenda Larzabal can enter without serious threat from insurgent or paramilitary groups. (IMB PHOTO)

lages. Until recently, the Nu didn’t wear clothes. They sleep in hammocks hung from open huts topped with palm fronds. The jungle is their only source of food. Poison-tipped darts fired from blow guns snare birds or monkeys; wild plantains, insects and honey are gathered by hand.

This primal existence is due, in part, to the Nu’s limited contact with the outside world. Hidden deep within the Colombian rain forest, there are no roads that lead to their villages. To reach them, the Rojas must hop a two-hour flight aboard a small plane to an unmarked landing strip carved into the jungle. From there it’s a four-hour walk with their two young girls in tow.

### Insurgents vs. the Gospel

But distance isn’t the only barrier between the indigenous and the Gospel — there’s also the threat

posed by antigovernment insurgents and illegal paramilitary outfits. Clashes with the Colombian army have forced these groups into remote areas of the countryside, the same areas where indigenous tribes make their homes. The insurgent problem is so widespread that nearly every unevangelized tribe, including the Nu, falls within their territory. Ransom kidnappings are practically guaranteed for foreigners who try to reach them.

While Americans would be conspicuous in these areas, Colombians blend in — which makes them ideal missionaries to indigenous communities. There's still some risk; but for the sake of the Gospel, it's a risk missionaries like the Rojas are willing to take.

"It's true where we live is a bit dangerous and sometimes isn't very comfortable," Lee says. "But God tells us that the day of salvation is today. Christ died for the Nu and He sent us to tell them. We know our lives are in His hands. If we die, so be it, because Jesus will be there waiting for us."

That sense of urgency was burned into the Rojas' hearts the day Cho died. Counted among the family's dearest Nu friends, he was there from the very beginning of their ministry. Cho had helped John and Lee on countless occasions, spending hours patiently teaching them the Nu language or sharing fish he had caught for dinner. Their girls, "Grace" and "Joy," even called him "grandpa."

But despite all Cho had given them, the Rojas were not able to give Cho the gift he needed most. At the time, they were working to perfect their language skills and hadn't yet been able to share the Gospel with any of the Nu — not even Cho.

### **Hearts broken for a people**

One day Cho became very sick. He was taken to a doctor in the city, but he died suddenly the next morning. John was sent to bring his body home.



**WAITING TO HEAR** – About 500 Alhuata live in the village of "Camacho," though the tribe's total population tops 70,000 in Colombia. Precious few have a relationship with Jesus Christ. (IMB PHOTO)

"My heart broke," Lee remembers. "I told God, 'He didn't have a chance to believe because he wasn't able to hear about You.'"

That night the Rojas poured out their hearts in prayer, pleading with the Father on behalf of the Nu.

"We asked God that we never again bury a man or woman of this tribe without having the opportunity to tell them about Jesus," Lee says.

Filled with regret and doubt, they turned to the Larzabals for help. Fernando and Brenda reassured them and offered guidance and friendship. They connected John and Lee with a local Colombian church that agreed to support their ministry. More importantly, the Larzabals helped them develop a new strategy for reaching the Nu, one that allowed them to begin sharing the Gospel right away.

### New tool jump-starts evangelism

Within just a few months the Rojas were back on the field, witnessing to the Nu for the first time using chronological Bible stories. This is an evangelism tool that involves sharing and discussing a series of key stories from the Bible, usually from creation to Christ. Story sets are often tailored to address specific issues relevant to a particular people group.

“We prayed that the stories would be more to the Nu people than just another fable or fairy tale,” Lee says. “Specifically, we asked that the issue of sin would be confronted and understood because the Nu did not take blame for anything they did.”

Dut was among the first to listen to the stories and was captivated by what she heard. The Rojas quickly recognized the Holy Spirit at work, bringing Dut closer to confronting her sin.

### Story hits home for Dut

“She had already learned from the story of Cain and Abel that God knows and sees everything,” Lee says. “When we went over God’s law of ‘Thou shall not kill,’ Dut knew she was cornered and that day she confessed.”

“I buried these kids alive and now I am on the burner,” Dut told Lee. “What will God do with me?”

Then came the story of Jonah and Nineveh’s repentance.

“I have to do like the people of Nineveh,” she said. To the Rojas’ surprise, Dut immediately knelt in the dirt and asked for God’s forgiveness.

“That was a moment of rejoicing for us,” Lee remembers. “We knew this was the beginning of God’s Word arriving with power among the Nu people.”

They still hadn’t gotten to the story of Christ. When they did, Lee says Dut was overjoyed to learn that Jesus had died for her sins, even the sins that seemed unforgivable — like murdering five of her children.

“No, I am not going to hell because Christ paid for that, too,” Dut declared.

### New start for a village

She soon brought her entire family to listen to the Bible stories. Dut’s sister was next to receive the Lord. Within a year, the Rojas had shared the Gospel with all 120 Nu in the village. More than 60 accepted Christ and 20 were baptized.

Today John says God’s presence is transforming the village. Nu believers no longer worship spirits or visit witch doctors. Adultery, theft and other problems have dropped dramatically. What’s more, Nu families aren’t going hungry for fear of evil spirits.

“In the past I used to be afraid of death and would not hunt in the jungle,” one Nu villager told John. “But now I know that if I die I will go to heaven because God sent a Savior for my sins.

“Now I feel free.”

*Names in quotation marks were changed.*