One of the difficult realities of living in a country like Colombia is revealed by Camilo Insuasty-Obando as he recounts visiting his mother, a leading political campaigner, in prison...

Camilo Insuasty-Obando is an independent journalist and the son of Colombian political prisoner Liliany Obando. When he wrote this article, Liliany had been released from her prison cell at Buen Pastor Women's prison and was finishing the remaining months of her sentence under house arrest. On 5th August 2014, Liliany was taken into custody again but has since returned to live at her home in Bogota under house arrest. Her sentence is for the vague charge of ‘rebellion’, a charge that has been used to imprison thousands of unionists, student activists and human rights defenders. For updates concerning Liliany’s case, please visit the websites of Justice for Colombia or the International Network in Solidarity with the Political Prisoners.

I do not remember the exact day that I entered a prison, but I do remember with precision how that day transpired. That day would be the beginning of my family's struggle for freedom, as only one of us was behind bars but we all would suffer the two faces of the prison, the outside and the inside.

That would be the first of many Saturdays where entering the prison to visit a family member would be more than a right, a real achievement. Being a family member of an inmate already puts you directly in the game that Inpec (National Institute of Prisons and Penitentiaries) wants to play – officers in blue uniforms that you have only seen on television. From this day forward we would have to learn to sort through every condition, every attack and every humiliation on the part of the prison guards. In reality the prison was their empire. They were the emperors and we, the enemy.

In the interminable queues that extend dozens of metres from the front gate of the prison, one encounters people, whether in inclement sun or rain, who have come from all parts of the city and some from other regions, people of different social classes, with different ways of seeing the world. It appeared that some live comfortable lives while others carry marks and scars that reveal their daily struggle for survival. An atmosphere of camaraderie and solidarity could be perceived in the entrance line such that differences between people do not then matter.

The only objective, as much for the rich as the poor, was to be able to enter. But as the corruption in this country is infused throughout all social spheres and spaces, the prison is not beyond that and the persons with the greater social status and economic resources clearly have privileges such as entering with a large quantity of food and utensils which surpass the limit of what is permitted to others. They enter more rapidly and without having to wait in line.

This day would be the first of many in which I would see how people were required to throw out the food that they brought for their family members. I would see how the guards were impeding the entry of persons coming from Antioquia, Valle, Tolima, Huila...
and many other faraway regions, who after a long driven journey are told that among other things, they were not registered, that they are missing a stamp, that they were not on the visitor list. It was one excuse after another that literally left people perplexed by sadness and unable to see their family members.

In order to visit a family member or friend in the prison first you must register in the Inpec system in order to receive your entrance number that is assigned in the order in which one arrives. The numbers 500, 600, 650 were the numbers for someone such as myself arriving outside the prison at 9:00 or 9:30am. Someone informed me that many of those who were before me had arrived as early as 4am. The lines move slowly and after 1 lam, if you had not entered, you would have to try again the following Saturday. It is interesting to see how in Colombia, despite the grand difficulties and the drastic repression, its inhabitants still hold to the firm desire to get ahead. Thus the prison also represents an opportunity to make some money with a number of persons working outside the prison, selling food, taking photographs for Inpec to look over, inspecting belts, jackets and other articles that are not permitted. After some time, Inpec dislodged these persons from the immediate vicinity of the prison.

Once inside, the drama intensified. The treatment was each time more hostile on the part of the guard. The motto that was at the entrance, ‘Your human dignity and mine are inviolable’ remained written only on the wall. For Inpec you were an intruder and they would look for whatever excuse in order to demoralise you. On two occasions they tried to oblige me to take off my clothes without justification and I know of cases of women who had to arbitrarily undress. Many times they obliged us to remove and throw away food or to eat what was ‘prohibited’. The articles not permitted changed every week.

On other occasions, they falsely accused me of skipping the line with the police dogs, directing shouts and intimimating statements in my direction. The inspections were intense and those who performed them at the time harassed people with questions and mistreatment. The wait was eternal and finally after three or four hours you were before the last door that separates the prison within the prison. Behind that door there are mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, friends, the great majority of whom are considered only ‘delinquents’, an often overlooked fact.

The atmosphere is always very sharp in the interior of the prison patio. You feel asphyxiated and there are very few reasons to smile in a place where the passage of time is exaggeratedly slow.

You want to leave. The happiness of seeing your loved one is countered by the stress endured during the day. If a few hours seem interminable within the prison, imagining four, five or even 30 or 40 years is very difficult. It is hard to put oneself in those shoes and accept that crude reality. The visiting time is short and unnerving. The conditions in which prisoners are living and in which they continue to live, leave much to be desired.

Although the Buen Pastor women’s prison does not represent the extreme conditions of the men’s prisons and other jails, it does suffer from overcrowding. The cells in which two or more prisoners must sleep and live are of an extremely reduced space. The health service is terrible, if practically non-existent. The spaces for libraries, recreation, hygiene and other facilities are quite precarious.

The visits ended too quickly. You are left wanting to be there a little longer, an hour or two, but Inpec very rapidly emptied the patio and there they were, the last moments, those that marked the close of the day. On leaving there were lines, equal to those when you arrived outside the prison at 9:00 or 9:30am. The numbers 500, 600, 650 were the numbers for someone such as myself arriving outside the prison at 9:00 or 9:30am.

Once outside the prison again, you breathe for a moment before beginning your walk. The world continues as usual, the cars circulate, the families pass by, and nothing stops. Everything seems to be relatively normal like always. For the outside, the prison does not exist. You pass and look from afar. It is as if hundreds of persons have been left to their own luck to die.

From this day forward I would see the prison through other eyes. This would be the first of many Saturdays that I would visit the Buen Pastor women’s prison, since the cruelties, the injustice and the persecution that are so frequent in Colombia had touched our door, snatching away our mother, Liliany Obando, on an afternoon in August 2008. The cost of her commitment to achieving better and more equitable living conditions for many Colombians had been the targeting of her by the State, the indifference of many who were considered close or friends, and lastly, imprisonment.

As family, and as for many other families, we live together with the incarceration of our family members. Those who are outside live with the same intensity as those who are inside. When one of your loved ones is deprived of liberty, the nuclear family changes drastically and in a country where the great number of homes is composed of mothers who are heads of households, it becomes really difficult to overcome everyday life and survive practically when it is the mother who is behind bars.

The years have passed by, drenching us with the difficult realities that create a leviathan, indolent and repressive State. The adverse conditions also bring out positive aspects such as solidarity within the same family, the taking on of conscience, the struggle for justice, of being reflective before the difficulties of thousands of Colombians who are deprived of their liberty and their families.

If they were looking through incarceration to generate fear in Colombian families, such an approach has had a contrary effect. It has equipped us with courage and fortitude and every weekend, at the outskirts of all the prisons in Colombia, the families, standing and waiting with enviable composure and dignity.