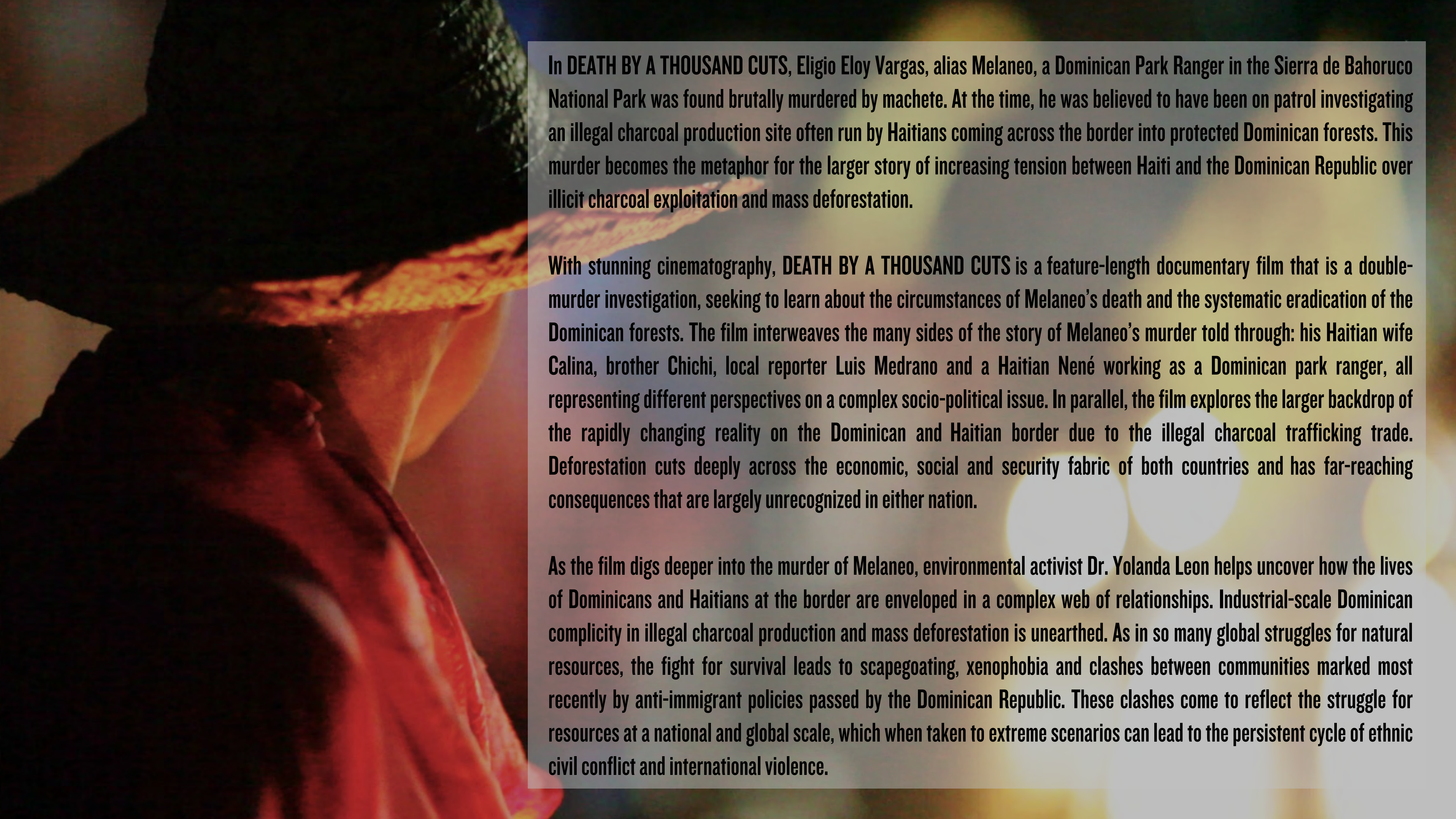


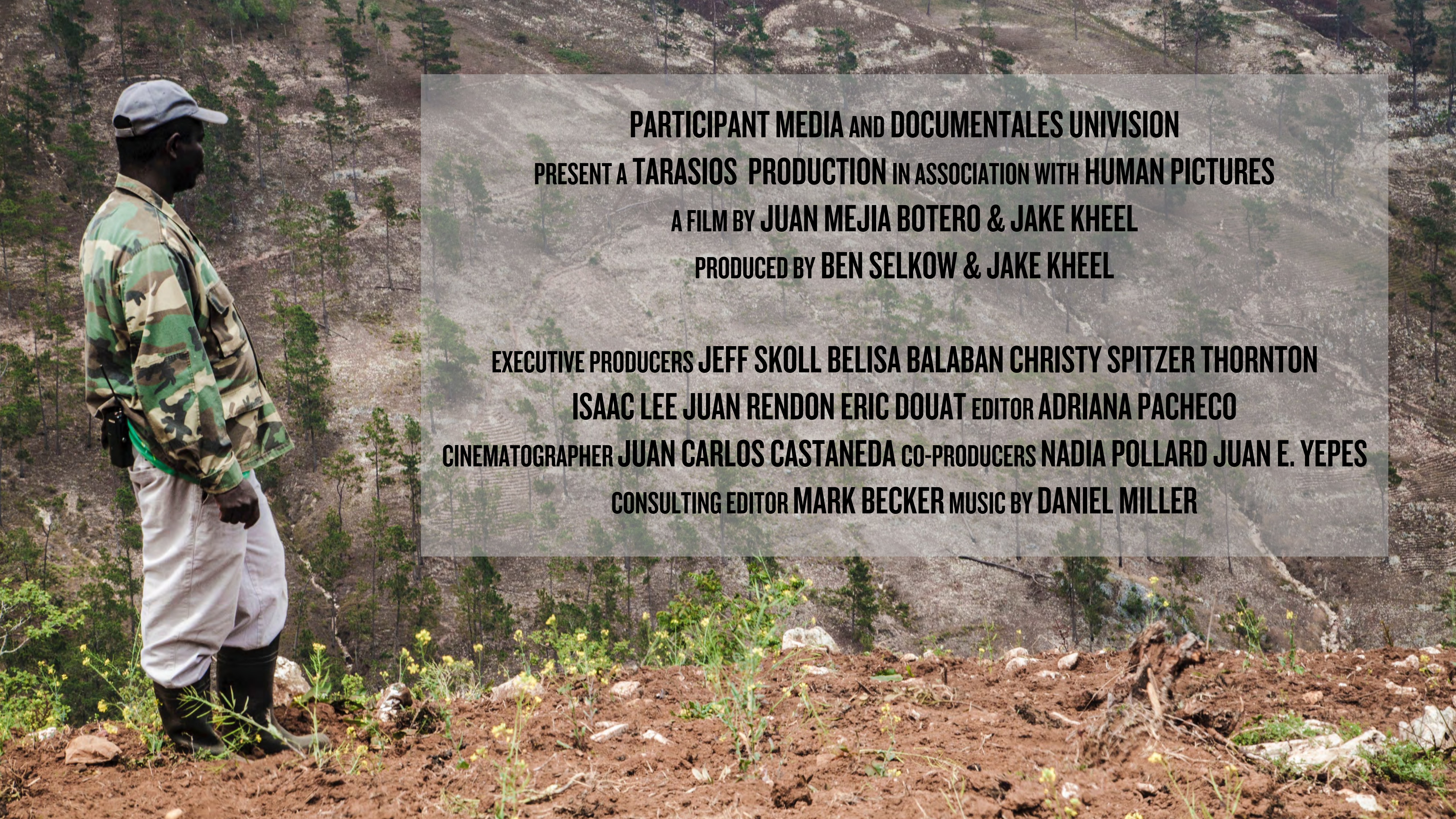
**DEATH** BY A  
**THOUSAND CUTS**



In **DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS**, Eligio Eloy Vargas, alias Melaneo, a Dominican Park Ranger in the Sierra de Bahoruco National Park was found brutally murdered by machete. At the time, he was believed to have been on patrol investigating an illegal charcoal production site often run by Haitians coming across the border into protected Dominican forests. This murder becomes the metaphor for the larger story of increasing tension between Haiti and the Dominican Republic over illicit charcoal exploitation and mass deforestation.

With stunning cinematography, **DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS** is a feature-length documentary film that is a double-murder investigation, seeking to learn about the circumstances of Melaneo's death and the systematic eradication of the Dominican forests. The film interweaves the many sides of the story of Melaneo's murder told through: his Haitian wife Calina, brother Chichi, local reporter Luis Medrano and a Haitian Nené working as a Dominican park ranger, all representing different perspectives on a complex socio-political issue. In parallel, the film explores the larger backdrop of the rapidly changing reality on the Dominican and Haitian border due to the illegal charcoal trafficking trade. Deforestation cuts deeply across the economic, social and security fabric of both countries and has far-reaching consequences that are largely unrecognized in either nation.

As the film digs deeper into the murder of Melaneo, environmental activist Dr. Yolanda Leon helps uncover how the lives of Dominicans and Haitians at the border are enveloped in a complex web of relationships. Industrial-scale Dominican complicity in illegal charcoal production and mass deforestation is unearthed. As in so many global struggles for natural resources, the fight for survival leads to scapegoating, xenophobia and clashes between communities marked most recently by anti-immigrant policies passed by the Dominican Republic. These clashes come to reflect the struggle for resources at a national and global scale, which when taken to extreme scenarios can lead to the persistent cycle of ethnic civil conflict and international violence.



**PARTICIPANT MEDIA AND DOCUMENTALES UNIVISION**  
**PRESENT A TARASIOS PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH HUMAN PICTURES**  
**A FILM BY JUAN MEJIA BOTERO & JAKE KHEEL**  
**PRODUCED BY BEN SELKOW & JAKE KHEEL**

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JEFF SKOLL BELISA BALABAN CHRISTY SPITZER THORNTON**  
**ISAAC LEE JUAN RENDON ERIC DOUAT EDITOR ADRIANA PACHECO**  
**CINEMATOGRAPHER JUAN CARLOS CASTANEDA CO-PRODUCERS NADIA POLLARD JUAN E. YEPES**  
**CONSULTING EDITOR MARK BECKER MUSIC BY DANIEL MILLER**

## JUAN MEJIA BOTERO | Co-Director

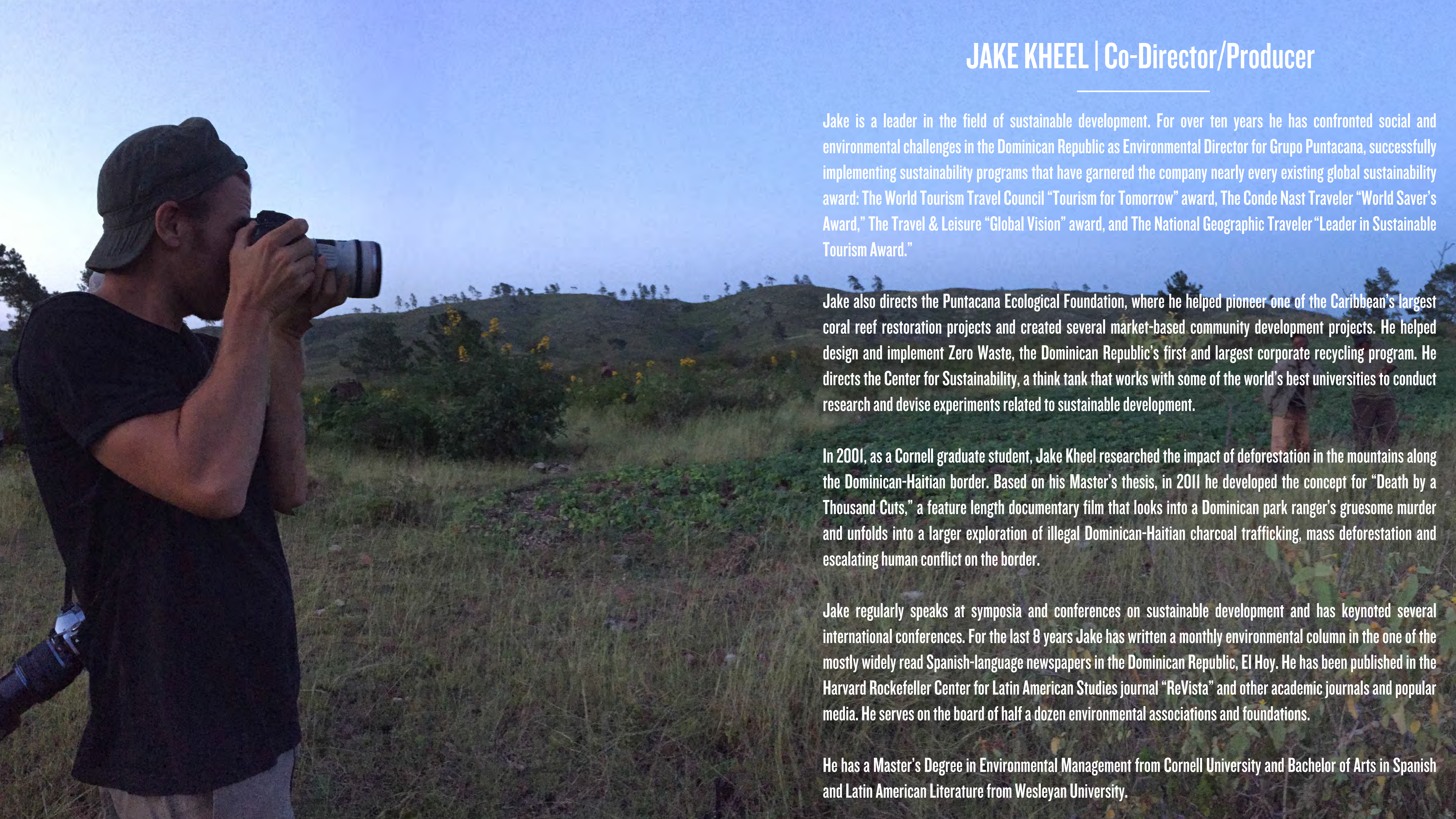
Juan Mejia Botero is an award-winning film director with over a decade of experience in feature length and short documentaries. His work has focused primarily on human rights, activist, grassroots media and collaborative documentaries.

As a Thomas J. Watson Fellow, Juan traveled, lived, and worked as a community video facilitator, guiding grassroots media projects in Colombia, Brazil, Perú, Chile and Ecuador. His documentary work has been deeply influenced by his community media work as well as his long-standing collaboration with grassroots organizations throughout the region. Juan's directorial debut, a medium-length documentary "Uprooted," about the life of a displaced Afro-Colombian family in the Pacific Coast of Colombia won a number of awards and played widely in film festivals in the U.S. and abroad. It was then aired on PBS as part of the Afro-Pop series.

In addition to directing "Death by a Thousand Cuts," Juan has directed a number of short and long format documentaries around matters of forced displacement, ethnic autonomy, state violence, natural resources and other important human rights issues, which have played widely in the festival circuit and television. His latest film, the feature documentary "The Battle for Land," winner of a production grant from the Colombian Ministry of Culture Cinema Fund and a post production grant from the Tribeca Film Institute is nearing completion and expects a 2016 premiere.

Juan has a BA in anthropology from Swarthmore College, an MA in Latin American Studies from UT-Austin and an MA in Social Documentary from UC-Santa Cruz.





## JAKE KHEEL | Co-Director/Producer

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Jake is a leader in the field of sustainable development. For over ten years he has confronted social and environmental challenges in the Dominican Republic as Environmental Director for Grupo Puntacana, successfully implementing sustainability programs that have garnered the company nearly every existing global sustainability award: The World Tourism Travel Council “Tourism for Tomorrow” award, The Conde Nast Traveler “World Saver’s Award,” The Travel & Leisure “Global Vision” award, and The National Geographic Traveler “Leader in Sustainable Tourism Award.”

Jake also directs the Puntacana Ecological Foundation, where he helped pioneer one of the Caribbean’s largest coral reef restoration projects and created several market-based community development projects. He helped design and implement Zero Waste, the Dominican Republic’s first and largest corporate recycling program. He directs the Center for Sustainability, a think tank that works with some of the world’s best universities to conduct research and devise experiments related to sustainable development.

In 2001, as a Cornell graduate student, Jake Kheel researched the impact of deforestation in the mountains along the Dominican-Haitian border. Based on his Master’s thesis, in 2011 he developed the concept for “Death by a Thousand Cuts,” a feature length documentary film that looks into a Dominican park ranger’s gruesome murder and unfolds into a larger exploration of illegal Dominican-Haitian charcoal trafficking, mass deforestation and escalating human conflict on the border.

Jake regularly speaks at symposia and conferences on sustainable development and has keynoted several international conferences. For the last 8 years Jake has written a monthly environmental column in the one of the mostly widely read Spanish-language newspapers in the Dominican Republic, El Hoy. He has been published in the Harvard Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies journal “ReVista” and other academic journals and popular media. He serves on the board of half a dozen environmental associations and foundations.

He has a Master’s Degree in Environmental Management from Cornell University and Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Latin American Literature from Wesleyan University.

## **BEN SELKOW | Producer**

**Ben Selkow is an award-winning, non-fiction television and film director/producer whose work has been showcased on HBO, CNN, Sundance Channel, Discovery, Science, Pivot TV, Esquire Network, and at film festivals globally. His work pushes the cinematographic medium while crafting great human stories that elevate topics to broader platforms of dialog, including global social justice issues such as mental health disorders, women's maternal health, the connection between environmental destruction and mass conflict. He has produced and directed long-form documentaries, docu-series, hosted international series and branded content all over the world.**

**In the feature documentary film space, Ben in addition to producing "Death by a Thousand Cuts," he recently directed and produced "Buried Above Ground," which premiered at the Woodstock Film Festival and was a Finalist for Best Documentary and Best Editing. Over six years, the vérité film goes on an inspirational journey with people trying to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With this film, he was selected for the 2010-2011 Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellowship and screened it for former First Lady Rosalynn Carter at the Carter Center in the Fall of 2015. Ben also produced "Prayer for a Perfect Season" (HBO, Producer, 2011) for director Marc Levin; "The Carrier" (Cinedigm/PBS World, Producer, 2011 - Tribeca Film Festival) for Maggie Betts and partnered with UNICEF and (RED) for HIV/AIDS education and awareness campaigns around prevention of mother to child HIV transmission; "A Summer in the Cage" (Sundance Channel, 2007) which focused on bipolar disorder and was nominated for a PRISM Award and won the 2009 Mental Health America (MHA) Media Award.**

**Presently, Ben is directing all six episodes of CNN's forthcoming series "Believer" with New York Times best-selling author and religious scholar Reza Aslan. This culture and travel series works as an immersive and investigative probe into religions and their adherents including episodes in India, Israel, Haiti, Mexico, Hawaii and California. Other non-fiction television directing and producing credits include: two episodes of the Emmy and Peabody Award-winning docu-series "Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown" (CNN, Director/Producer, 2014), three episodes of the Anthony Bourdain-executive produced travel series "The Getaway" (Esquire Network, 2014), ten episodes of "Welcome to Fairfax" (Pivot TV, Executive Producer, 2014), "Get To Work" (Sundance Channel, Senior Story Producer, 2012), and the Steven Spielberg executive produced Emmy Award-winning six-part series "Rising: Rebuilding Ground Zero (DreamWorksTV/Discovery Channel, Post Producer, 2011).**

**In 2003, Ben was invited to attend the prestigious Sundance Institute Producers' Conference. Ben graduated from Wesleyan University's Film Studies Program and African-American Studies Program both with Honors.**



While working in community service programs in the southwestern Dominican Republic in 1999, co-director Jake Kheel had an enlightening conversation with several villagers while swimming in the Bahoruco River. The river was a small, but steady stream that ran through town. The locals described how it used to roar by, stocked with freshwater shrimp, fish and crab. It was one of the biggest rivers in the region and you could hear it from miles away. When he asked why the river had shrunk to almost a trickle, they pointed to the nearby mountains and said “Están tumbando los arboles en la loma.” They are cutting down the forest in the mountains. This began his nearly two-decade exploration of the Sierra de Bahoruco mountain range and the story of its slow decline.

After conducting his Master’s thesis research in the Sierra de Bahoruco and moving full-time to work in the Dominican Republic, Jake pitched his interest in the border forest as a multi-media project to veteran filmmaker and college friend Ben Selkow. Together Ben and Jake undertook a scouting mission covering 400 miles of trail and highway, crisscrossing the entire Sierra de Bahoruco mountain range. They conducted dozens of interviews with Dominican forest rangers and Haitian migrant farmers while witnessing firsthand the rapid advance of deforestation in the high mountains. In certain remote areas, you could literally smell the smoke of charcoal ovens from an open car window.

Co-director Juan Mejia Botero joined the team in 2011, after a decade of working in Latin America documenting issues of forced displacement and territorial rights. He was immediately struck by the growing tension over natural resources on the island of Hispaniola. In addition, Juan saw what the impact of these tensions were in real human terms, specifically in the case of the murder of a park ranger Melaneo Vargas who was allegedly killed by a Haitian charcoal producer named Pablo Tupal. The murder seemed to encapsulate the potential for a larger conflict between the two countries, but also the complex and entangled underlying issues of wealth inequality, political history and race.





The Dominican Republic and Haiti are a unique case study, demonstrating how the exploitation of natural resources can directly affect the fate of the nation. The two countries share the island of Hispaniola, but have starkly different trajectories, in large part, related to how they have managed their natural resources. Haiti suffers from less than 2% forest cover and is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. The Dominican Republic, with estimates of forest cover of approximately 25%, has become one of the strongest and most stable economies in the region and is often held as a model for natural resource protection and conservation.

In Haiti, charcoal made from trees is the primary source for cooking fuel. With no viable alternative and few trees with which to meet its own charcoal demand, Haiti is becoming more and more dependent on the forests of the Dominican Republic to produce charcoal and supply its charcoal markets. The forested area on the border of the Dominican Republic, including but not limited to the national park, has become the obvious source to produce large quantities of charcoal used to meet the massive demand in Haiti. Charcoal producers find remote parcels of forest, clear vast quantities of trees to make clandestine charcoal ovens and then smuggle the product back to Haiti in sacks for sale.

The simple narrative became that it was Haitians looking to fill their country's high charcoal demand that turned to the Dominican forests and were the primary culprits in their destruction. However, as we began to investigate the reality on the ground for this film, we quickly found that this overview, while not entirely inaccurate, was definitely incomplete.



In the five years we have dedicated to this film, we have personally witnessed the forests of the Sierra slowly disappear. Understanding why has been a true journey of discovery—the other culprits being loggers and tenant farmers. At times frustrating and at other times exhilarating, the story grew and became more complex as we pursued leads and continued to follow the various threads in our story along the Haitian-Dominican border. We journeyed by trucks, motorcycles, motorboats, makeshift sailboats, and helicopter, following the charcoal trail and understanding what drives what has become a very important and lucrative, but destructive industry.

Our four-man field production team consisted of co-directors Jake and Juan, director of photography Juan Carlos Castañeda and field producer Juan Yepes. We worked leads and filmed in remote locations all along the border. After long, hard days of filming, we transcribed notes and texted photos of the days' work and our progress tracking the trail of charcoal from the only internet café in town where Ben could help track the developments in the story.

Our search for information about the murder of Melaneo led us to cross the border from the Dominican Republic to Haiti and back half a dozen times, often accompanied only by local guides and a train of mules carrying our gear. We wanted clues about the murder of Melaneo and the opportunity to hear a version of the murder directly from his purported assassin, Pablo Tupal. And though finding Tupal was not the full mission of our investigation, at times, it felt like he was watching us from the mountain slopes surrounding us. This feeling was easily heightened by the mysticism that runs deep throughout the Haitian-Dominican border.

In our journey following the charcoal trail, we discovered it is not simply desperately poor Haitians crossing the border and cutting down Dominican trees to make out a livelihood and support the demand for charcoal. We learned that many of the largest charcoal smuggling operations on Hispaniola were actually facilitated by, paid for, and directly benefitted select Dominicans that controlled its production. In the lowlands surrounding Lake Enriquillo and north of the Sierra de Bahoruco, both Dominican and Haitian charcoal producers struggle to make a living from charcoal, but often work for powerful Dominican merchants. These influential figures have managed not only to increase charcoal production along the border area, but also at times manage to acquire permits from the Dominican government, making it a quasi-legal activity. The role of influence trafficking and corruption in the increasing deforestation occurring along the border became more and more clear to us.





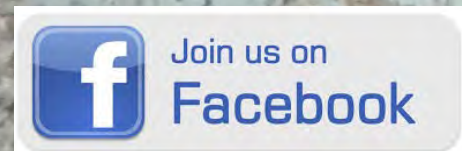
Perhaps most concerning is the national political and immigration narrative reviving of a “Haitian Invasion” taking place in the Dominican Republic. Included in this group are the Haitian laborers, counting those that perform the backbreaking labor to produce charcoal. This narrative has been exploited in the political realm and led to sweeping changes in the national immigration laws. Our team was on the border in June 2015 when the Dominican “National Regularization Plan for Foreigners” formally went into effect, which threw into doubt the legal status of hundreds of thousands of Haitians residing in the Dominican Republic. The unease and apprehension of both Haitians and Dominicans waiting to see how these tensions would play out was palpable in every corner of society.

Crossing the unmarked border from one country to the other through forests in the mountains, we witnessed the differences between these two nations, but also witnessed the deep similarities they share. We filmed Rara festivities—originated in Haiti—as Gaga ceremonies in Dominican territory. We experienced how Bachata rules hands-down all Haitian bars along the border, and interviewed a Haitian shaman highly respected in the Dominican town where he works. But most importantly, despite the emphasis often placed on how deeply different Dominicans and Haitians are, we clearly saw how poor charcoal producers on both sides of the border have much more in common than they might think.

The film, at its core, is a cautionary tale of how the increasingly fierce competition for natural resources combined with swelling wealth inequality can create fertile ground for civil strife. Even when initially represented as ethnic conflicts, if we step back and examine some of the world’s most recent international tragedies, we’ll often find this combination of factors at their center. The rising tensions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic are one example.



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