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## Colombia: Communities eradicate oil palm plantations to repossess their territory

As member of a group of international observers, invited by the Justice and Peace organization, we had the opportunity to visit an area in Colombia (Curvaradó) where ten years ago the local communities suffered from a violent eviction process and are now returning to their territories.

It should be noted that “suffered a violent eviction process” does not reflect all the horror of the actions undertaken by groups of paramilitary murderers with the support of the Colombian Armed Forces. By means of murder, torture, disappearances, destruction and torching of homes and bombing, the repression achieved its objective: the eviction from the region of all the communities (in particular the Afro-Colombian and mestizo population).

Ten years later in a courageous demonstration – in the midst of constant threats – the people have slowly started to return to their destroyed homes and have found that their lands and forest – where they had lived for over 120 years – are now occupied by thousands of hectares of monoculture oil palm plantations and that their “owners” are those same paramilitary forces responsible for the genocide that forced them to migrate. “When we got back it was all planted with palm trees,” an inhabitant told us indignantly.

Indignation has managed to overcome fear and the legitimate owners are striving to recover their territory occupied by the palm trees, in the only way they can, by eradicating them. “We must cut down the palm trees that are bothering us,” said one of the returning community members. In some cases they cut the palm trees down with chainsaws, in others they uproot them and in most cases they chop off all the leaves and the top sprout (“lopping” them). The work is exhausting as the palm trees have already got thick trunks and the leaves hide dangerous thorns that cause swelling and infection. Added to this are the dangers of poisonous snakes and wasps that attack when least expected. Some 20 people can only get rid of about two hectares of palm trees per day. At the time of the visit, it was estimated that some 40 hectares had been restored and were being planted with food crops.

The fact is that in Curvaradó palm trees are not considered as life or a possibility of life. “What life are they talking about when they talk about bio-fuels derived from palm trees? Here palm trees are green desolation, human destruction, the death of all life.” In this region, the majority of the 50 thousand hectares of Collective Territory were once pristine forests with more than 25 marshland areas. The inhabitants say that “they have exploited the timber we had, the marshes have been channelled and dried out, the animals have no food, the birds have left for lack of fruit.”

When asked about their plans for the future, they reply that they are seeking to produce food, “planting what we used to plant.” They also want to “restore the forests and start planting some trees” and for “the rivers to recover their water and for the fish to come back.” They want to organize “biodiversity zones to recover the species that have disappeared, the fish and the hunting,” seeking to “attract these species”.

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In a visit to the area we came to the village of Andalucía. The village no longer exists. It was all destroyed by the paramilitary forces. The founder of the village took us to where once his home had stood; all that is left now is the cement floor. We also visited the graveyard where only half is still in place as the “para-palm growers” committed the outrage of digging a drainage ditch through the middle of the graveyard, planting palm trees in the other half.

Life is not easy for those who have returned, as threats are made by the so-called “demobilized” forces (paramilitary forces that have supposedly laid down their arms) and they make photographic and video records of everyone, covering the area on motorcycles and generally making their presence felt. One of them, known as “El Chupa”, tells them in a threatening tone that “this cutting down of palm trees will be paid for elsewhere and it will cost you dearly, in the same way you cut the trees into pieces, it will happen to you.” Meanwhile there are rumours that the “Black Eagles” (a paramilitary group) are coming towards the area and well-known paramilitary members are patrolling up and down the areas where oil palms are being felled.

The “para-palm growers” are seeking to generate conflicts among the people. On the one hand they try to set up the workers hired to work in the plantations – many of them with a paramilitary past – against those who have returned, telling them that their work is being taken away from them. Thus, from the trucks – used by the company to transport like cattle some 60 workers at a time - insults or jeers are called out to those who are cutting down the palm trees “lop the palm trees, plant coca, we will come and harvest it” they shout from the trucks.

On the other hand, they are bringing in people from other regions – both former paramilitary and peasants – to occupy the lands belonging to the communities who have come back – under the absurd name of “forest warden families” (the only “forest” they want to protect are the palm plantations). It is the old strategy of division.

The military also have a role to play and at the military checkpoint on a bridge they ask people many questions, including “Who is paying you to cut down the palm trees?” Given their previous direct involvement in repressing the communities, their presence causes fear in those who have come back.

Neither are we “gringos” (that is to say, all the non-Colombians who support these communities) free from threats, and thus as if by magic signs spring up saying “go away gringos” and “death to the gringos.”

However, in spite of everything, the communities continue to recover their territory. When we were leaving, one of them said to us “I ask you to make the truth known to the world.” This article is aimed at just that, while at the same time paying tribute to these peoples’ heroism and condemning the Colombian Government responsible for this situation. There are few places in the world where oil palm trees are tainted with as much blood as in Curvaradó and the only way of starting to repair the outrages committed is for the Government to legally recognize these communities’ rights to their lands. Until then, it deserves to be condemned.

By Ricardo Carrere, based on observations and interviews made during a visit to Curvaradó between 9 and 11 August 2007

More information in Spanish (and photos) at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Colombia.html#info>

