Colombia: oil-palm plantations, violation of human rights and Afro-descendent communities' quest for true dignity

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When you talk about the violation of human rights, you must talk about Colombia. When you talk about the huge expansion of oil-palm plantations, you must talk about Colombia. Both issues go hand in hand in that country

One of the solutions put forward to face the climate change crisis is the promotion of agrofuels, including oil-palm. This proposal not only does not address the unsustainable production, marketing and consumption models that have landed us in this critical situation but also conceals the fact that the oil palm, far from being a "green" fuel, is a "red" one, tainted with blood.

In 1959 the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó basins in the Colombian Choco biogeographical region were designated as Natural Reserves. However, in 1996 the army and paramilitary forces launched an attack in the area and enabled oil palm growers, cattle ranchers and loggers to expand their agribusiness.

Oil palm plantations and cattle ranching took over 23 thousand hectares of collective territory belonging to Afro-descendent communities. Either through direct actions of the regular army or indirectly through paramilitary strategies, hundreds of crimes were committed: the massacre or forced disappearance of over 140 people, in addition to the ransacking and destruction of property, community members being persecuted, threatened and forced to abandon their land.

Human Rights organizations and families of forcibly disappeared people have provided figures for the whole of Colombia, amounting to more than 4 million people displaced from their lands by armed operations over the past 15 years together with over 15 thousand forced disappearances. Close on 7 million hectares of land have been illegally appropriated by paramilitary forces or drug traffickers over the same period, in most cases after forcing displacement of the inhabitants.

These State and paramilitary terrorist actions are all part of a strategy seeking not only to seize territories, but also to use them to establish destructive commercial processes. In the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó basins, dispossession of land was accompanied by vigorous felling of primary forests in an area covering over 10 thousand hectares, the drying up of five rivers, pollution of water courses from agrochemicals used in the oil palm plantations that also caused severe health problems, particularly in the case of women and children.

Over 120 years ago, the abolition of slavery led to a diaspora to what is known as the Bio Pacific Choco. People settled in tropical forests, places of great beauty hosting an enormous variety of species, plants, birds, butterflies, flowers, wild animals, primary tree vegetation and insects. These places became truly free spaces where the settlers mingled with the indigenous peoples and later with Mestizos. Finally they became a tribal people, recognized as such because their "social, cultural

and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations.” (1) They are acknowledged as members of a “Black community” and “Afro-Colombians” or “Afro-descendents.”

This identity embraces issues related with a sense of belonging to the community, which is linked by the river and rooted in an ancestral territory with which they have an almost umbilical relationship: the territory is their mother and father because it nourishes them. They understand it as a comprehensive web, not only involving the land but also the human beings, the social network, the community organization, ways of subsistence, of internal conflict solving, of mobility when facing events that threaten their lives, and their own relationship with biodiversity. Their territory guarantees their customs and ways of living, communal property and environmental protection.

Enforced displacement is therefore a violation of the integrity of these communities’ existence and has caused injury in personal, family and collective terms. It has damaged social and cultural practices, ways of living and of territorial occupation, ways of relating with the earth, animals, water, cooking, organization and their interaction with the outside world.

Though facing innumerable violations of their human rights, even in the midst of an internal armed conflict and the implementation of illegal major works and agribusiness, in the Humanitarian and Biodiversity Zones Afro-descendent communities have developed innovative civil resistance processes.

Humanitarian Zones are places inhabited by a human group affirming their rights as part of the civilian population. These places, specifically intended for the protection of human and collective life as well as of ecosystems, are a means of returning to the territory and of confronting the criminal structure’s claims. Humanitarian Zones’ members freely share a Life Project to defend themselves from institutional militarization and from becoming victims of potential armed conflicts.

Biodiversity Zones are areas for the protection and rehabilitation of collective or private territory ecosystems and for the assertion of family groups’ right to food when their lands have been devastated or are at risk of being destroyed by the agribusiness, major works or exploitation of natural resources.

In these places, the communities practice freedom of expression, democratic discussion involving women and children, and production methods that ensure food sovereignty. They repossess and heal their territories.

While at the Climate Summit all kinds of devices are being contrived – REDD, agrofuels, geo-engineering and others – to put off the real measure that sooner or later will have to be taken: that of halting the extraction of fossil fuels, with the recovery of their territories from the hands of agribusiness and mega-enterprises, these communities are truly contributing to curbing climate change.

At a time of large scale violations of human rights, of ecocide, starting by climate change itself, these criminalized, outcast, stigmatized Colombian communities bear witness to their rights in an autonomous and liberating practice of true dignity.

1. Article 1.1 of ILO Convention 169 and Convention Number 169 on indigenous and tribal peoples: a manual, Project to promote ILO policy on indigenous and tribal peoples. Geneva 2003, page 7.

Extracted and adapted from the reports: “Resiliencias colectivas. Se mata con hambre, se mata con balas, y se quiere matar el alma”, (Collective resiliences. They kill by hunger, they kill with bullets and they want to kill the soul.” Danilo Rueda, Comisión de Justicia y Paz, http://tiny.cc/rbqAT; and “Derechos Humanos y Palma Aceitera Curvaradó y Jiguamiandó” (Human Rights and the Oil Palm Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó). From Ver 236, http://colombia.indymedia.org/news/2006/02/37083.php