

COLOMBIA

Indian Struggle For Land In Cauca Intensifies

The Colombian government has declared the department of Cauca a "zone of national rehabilitation," a term used to designate areas where special measures must be taken as a result of human actions or natural events. In Cauca, the "disaster" that has occurred is increasing social tension caused by the old problem of land.

The Cauca is the only department in Colombia where the majority of the population is Indian, but the region has long been controlled politically and economically by a coalition of landlords and a conservative Roman Catholic church. The power elite was shocked in the early 1970's by the creation of the Cauca Regional Indian Council (CRIC), which is among the most successful grassroots political organizations in Colombia in recent years.

CRIC has been central to the struggle of Indian people throughout Colombia. It was a key contributor to the creation of the National Indian Organization of Colombia (ONIC) in 1980, which includes 18 regional federations representing 75 per cent of the Indian population of the country. Each organization publishes its own newspaper, and the 10-year-old *Unidad Indígena*, formerly published by CRIC, is now the official publication of ONIC. *Unidad Alvaro Ulcúe*, CRIC's current newspaper, is named in honor of the only Indian to become a priest in Colombia. He was killed two years ago as a result of his participation in the Indian struggle.

Although Indian people have been expelled from their land and forced to integrate into non-Indian society for centuries, the formation of regional and national Indian organizations has meant that the "Indian conflict" has been forced onto the government's agenda of major problems. The situation is complicated by the armed struggle being waged between government forces and non-Indian guerrillas.

An editorial in the CRIC newspaper in November, 1986, states that "the guerrilla groups have declared war from Indian territory on the current government." CRIC condemns this development because of its negative social and political consequences for Indian people. Indian organizations reject the militaristic solution which has been proposed by, among others, former president Carlos Lleras Restrepo, who recently called for the organization of patrols by military veterans in the countryside. This would result in the institutionalization of para-military organizations which have been responsible for murder and destruction in the area. Faced by two armies, ONIC adopted a neutral position at its national congress last year, but from an editorial in a fall, 1986, issue of *Unidad Alvaro Ulcúe*, it seems that CRIC is more inclined to support the government initiative as the best way to maintain the autonomy of Indian organizations and to defend Indian land.

