



Colombia: Indigenous Peoples Mobilize to End Violence, Land Invasions

A resonating protest by Indigenous peoples in Colombia lasting thirty seven days ended last August 5, 1996 after negotiations with the government yielded official promises for human rights and greater control over their own territories. Indigenous peoples and their leaders from over 60 different Indigenous nations agreed to leave the main branch of the Colombian Episcopal Conference in Bogotá which they had been occupying since July 5, 1996. Another group of Wayúu Indians had taken over the Office of Indigenous Affairs of the Interior Ministry on June 24, 1996.

This latest round of nation-wide Indigenous mobilization in Colombia was to protest government inaction and indifference to the wave of killings of Indigenous peoples on the part of drug-sponsored paramilitary mafias. They also took over various government

offices and demanded action in the face of peasant invasions of their land and the virtual cessation of land reform laws initiated in 1991.

Since April of this year, 10 Indigenous leaders from various Indian nations have been assassinated, bringing the total to 200 since 1990. "Across the regions of Córdoba, Antioquia, Chocó, they are killing Indigenous people, for political, or even territorial reasons," affirms Abadio Green, Kuna Indian and president of ONIC (National Indigenous Organization of Colombia) in an interview with SAIC. "Indigenous peoples are not willing to let go of their land, so they fight and that's why they are killed."

During 37 days of demands and extensive negotiations, the government of President Ernesto Samper agreed to the establishment of a special human rights commission, and, two weeks later, to the formation of a permanent

"mesa de concertación," or a permanent council of major Indigenous representatives and members of the national government that could stop harmful development projects on Indigenous lands. "No works, investments, environmental license, or development project can be executed within Indigenous territories without the consent of Indigenous peoples," says Green, who actively negotiated the agreement. If this measure is implemented, it will effectively curtail the careless destruction of Indigenous territories in Colombia.

Since the beginning of Colombia's coca-growing and coca paste industry in the 1970s, wealthy druglords have come to comprise a new land-owning elite, with 42% of the best land in their hands. Resisting this trend are the peasant organizations and guerrilla groups, in place since the 1950s. To get rid of what it considers "communists," the

military has sided with the narco landowners and trained joint paramilitary units. These have not only attacked guerrilla forces, but civilian organizations and leaders as well, many of them Indigenous. The result has been a bloody struggle in the countryside that has displaced campesinos and Indigenous people—perhaps as many as 800,000—and killed thousands. Many campesinos have invaded long-since established Indigenous territories, known as *resguardos*, in search of land. Many others have simply swelled the slums surrounding Bogotá and other major cities.

There is another aspect to the violence against Indigenous leaders, however. Since 1991, when a new constitution gave the roughly 750,000 Indigenous peoples in Colombia broad political, judicial, and financial powers to control their territories (*resguardos*), many Indians have been elected to political posts at various levels, and this has not gone over well with the traditional power structure. "Throughout Colombia," says Green, "we have achieved, politically speaking, a certain equality—we can be mayors, deputies, councilmen. In many parts the Indians have had an important political impact. The big politicians that have always controlled everything have identified this as a threat. For this, too, they are killing Indigenous people."

With their wealth, the narco-sponsored paramilitary groups have amassed an impressive arsenal, against which there is no protection for Indigenous leaders who have received death threats. "You fight under these circumstances and when it becomes obvious that you're in danger, about all you can do is leave the region and go somewhere else," explains Green. ONIC was the target of paramilitary violence in 1994 when gunmen killed four Zenu leaders, among them Porfirio Ayala, assistant secretary general of ONIC. The others were Hector Malo, who was running for the senate; Luis Arturo Lucas, a former ONIC representative; and Cesar Meza.

As part of the demands in this latest round of protests, the special Human Rights Commission would be composed of the minister of the interior, of defense and justice, the presidential council for human rights, Indigenous senators, and would be monitored by international institutes including the ILO.

The question of land, still the most poignant aspect of the Indigenous struggle, took the front stage during the protests. Aside from the permanent council to regulate land concessions affecting Indigenous areas, Indigenous peoples sought to reactivate the provisions of the 1991 constitution, which declared Colombia a multi-ethnic nation and granted them two seats in Congress. Legislation soon followed that gave them unprecedented judicial, political, and financial control over the *resguardos*, which are lands under old Spanish colonial titles now officially recognized by the state as Indigenous territories. Since then, however, the *resguardos* have retained their old dimensions while their Indigenous population has increased. Few additional Indigenous territories have been officially titled. In addition, the process of *saneamiento*, or the purchase of land by the state from small landholders located within Indigenous territories in order to remove them, has not been adequately carried out.

To remedy this situation, one of the decrees signed by President Samper



calls for the creation of a National Commission of Territories, which would be responsible for researching Indigenous land tenure necessities and determining and administering the required funds. It will be composed of various ministers and the Colombian land reform institute, INCORA. 🐦

The Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC), one of the oldest Indigenous organizations in Colombia as well as Latin America, will be sending several Indigenous representatives to Europe and the US to mobilize the international community and expose the plight of Indigenous peoples in Colombia. They plan to participate in the National Conference of the Colombian Human Rights Network in New York city from October 25-27.

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