

FACING COLONIZATION

INTERVIEW WITH ALFONSO PALMA

PRESIDENT OF ONIC

SAIIC: What region do you come from and who do you represent?

AP: My name is Alfonso Palmas, I come from the department of Tolima from the interior of the country, and represent ONIC (Organization of Indigenous Nationalities of Colombian), of which I have been the president since June, 1990.

SAIIC: What is the role of ONIC?

AP: Our role is to train, orient and promote organization in the indigenous communities, because we believe that it is the indigenous peoples who must look for solutions to our own problems. ONIC promotes programs, we like to promote inter-ethnic relations among the different ethnic groups in the country and with those in other countries.

SAIIC: What is the indigenous population of Colombia, and how many groups are there?

AP: There are about 100 indigenous groups, and we speak more than 80 languages and are located all over the country.

SAIIC: How would you describe the situation of the indigenous communities in Colombia?

AP: Up to this moment the wave of violence against indigenous peoples continues in Colombia: very often the leaders are persecuted and even assassinated. We continue to face colonization of traditional lands — that is indigenous lands are still being taken —



Alfonso Palma, center, describing the situation in Colombia at the SAIIC office with representatives of the Tonantzin Land Institute and Bay Area Indian Alliance

the drug problem, guerrilla organizations... all these groups have lack of respect for the indigenous communities. In addition, a major problem is that of communication, there is no permanent communication. We have no means to communicate among ourselves, much less with indigenous communities of other countries. The state does not provide us with anything, in fact the government has sponsored division among us by creating organizations similar to, but self-sufficient from those of the indigenous peoples. Therefore we cannot analyze or understand other communities problems, nor can we be updated on issues which involve us, or evaluate the actual national situation.

Another problem is the exploitation of natural resources by foreign and even national companies. They never consult with the in-

igenous communities and their acts only bring more problems for us. First of all, the cultural clash. Then, contamination of all living creatures and plants, and death of our people. Also, we have land but no means to produce, and if we do produce then the production goes through an intermediary and this person retains all the profit, leaving the indigenous with little or almost nothing.

SAIIC: Can you tell us about the massacre of Dec. 16 and what ONIC does in such cases?

AP: In Colombia there are, legally speaking, "indigenous reservations", these cannot be sold nor rented (leased), and they are imprescriptible; that is the indigenous communities can claim them whenever they want. In this case there are many territories

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with colonial titles that belong to the indigenous communities, but the farmers, ranchers, and landowners, and production companies have kicked out indigenous communities by violent means, and this is what has happened in Colombia. In the case of the massacre, the killing took place in the department of Cauca in the PAES territory, where they had been reclaiming their land from the government for four years. However, this land has been invaded by big landowners who form large groups and send them to kill the indigenous. In this case, the indigenous had communicated to the government about their claims, however, the State did not answer, therefore the massacre took place. In these cases, ONIC, first of all issues denunciations at the national and international levels. We've denounced this and many other problems which are unknown to the international community. For example, the massacre of December last year, where five compañeros were burned alive by narcotraffickers. We denounce all of this violence against indigenous peoples. Last year ONIC met with the Government Ministry, and the senators and we demanded that the state respond to all of these acts of terror and what the State was doing to investigate. Until now, all we know is that there is an investigative commission and that there is a negotiation being carried with the institute of land reform. However, we are pessimistic about these type of investigations because our experience is that such investigations do not bring any results, as occurred with the indigenous peoples of the Aruaco community, where the armed forces and even government people were involved, and nothing was ever done. In that case, more than 20 compañeros were assassinated.

SAIIC: What are the activities of ONIC planned for 1992?

AP: At the local level, we are working with the organizations in the interior of the indigenous communities. We are working with students, professors, the popular sectors, blacks, environmentalists and other people who see in the campaign a positive aspect, that it is important to reflect and cultivate our magnificent and rich culture, also that we evaluate and reflect what these 500 years have meant for our culture. Also in the



proposals for the Constitution we have to make clear that Colombia is a multi-ethnic pluricultural country, and we have to work closely with other indigenous peoples who are working on the campaign, who have similar and different problems, so that we can create bonds of fraternity and unity among indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

SAIIC: There were 3 indigenous representatives elected to the congress of the country. Who are they? What are their proposals to the national Constitution?

AP: Compañero Gabriel Muyuy, representing ONIC, and Anatolio Quira of the Social Indigenous Alliance and Floro Alberto of the Autoridades Indígenas de Colombia. They represent different indigenous sectors, however we are trying to work in unity and present our proposals together. In addition, we believe that by having our own representatives we can have a voice; we are open to work with other people and like that other sectors of the society of Colombia work with us in problems which affect not only the indigenous peoples but all Colombians. Concerning the issues of the national Assembly, we have obtained that in the constitution it be stated that Colombia is a pluricultural state; the harmony of many cultures is declared; the issue that the state must protect our national identity, that is our customs, traditions, language, all that makes us different. We have now achieved the recognition of our languages in our territories, that education be bilingual. We have about 40 groups who live near the border with other countries and the governments do not understand that for indigenous peoples there are no borders. So now they have double nationality. Another achievement is the recognition of ownership of our territories. Right now there is a discussion with the government because the government does not want to recognize territories traditionally occupied, which are large extensions. They want to recognize only the reservations; now we will struggle for the recognition of traditional lands, reservations. For this we are proposing a plan to the government so that we do not have foreigners coming to our communities and plan our development, but instead that this planning be left to us, once

we're trained. Another important aspect is that of jurisdiction; that is each community has its own form of sanction and imposition of penalties. We will try to fix this according to the national system. Now this is considered. Another issue is that in relation to the natural resources, its exploitation must be consulted with the indigenous peoples. For this we are hoping to write a guide, rules from all indigenous Peoples communities, that will be followed, because even if there are already laws they do not represent our view, nor are they followed. However we must organize within the communities, so that we can face the problems and present plans. For this we are planning a meeting for December 1992 to discuss the problems we have, how will we participate politically speaking.

INCORA is the institute in charge of handling land issues, conflicts; there are large extensions which have been traditionally occupied by the indigenous peoples who have always lived there and have no titles for it. They are called "traditionally occupied". The reservations are where INCORA has handled titles, but this sort of land is not defined yet.

SAIIC: If you could realize anything in the world, this year of 1992, what is the outcome you would hope for?

AP: At our level it will be that the Constitution serve our interests and not those of a few people, as has happened historically. We want to retain our cultures. We hope to unify at the continental level. We want to avoid past mistakes and work towards understanding among different communities; we are not going to celebrate the genocide, we want to analyze the past so that we can work for the future. We want to make demands on the UN since 1993 has been declared the year of indigenous peoples. We want a strong United Nations (UN) presence so that human rights violations be watched carefully and that something more than just condemnations be made. We want protection.

SAIIC: What role do you see the government playing in this multi-ethnic and pluricultural state?



AP: I believe that the government should facilitate changes. They are not only indigenous peoples but blacks and other groups; the government should protect the culture and promote overall cultural development.

SAIIC: What do you say to the Crioles, Campesino people who are afraid of losing land while indigenous peoples recuperate their lands?

AP: First of all, we are not claiming land which is not ours. Our claims are over lands which we have been on for hundreds of years; therefore we believe that if there are cases where there are Campesinos who have come to our land due to many problems, we demand the government carry out an integral agrarian reform, that they be relocated to lands where there are no indigenous communities, and to lands where they can survive and develop economically.

SAIIC: What ONIC is doing about education?

AP: We are talking to the government. We are participating in certain areas of education, such as health and agriculture. We believe that the state should provide access to education for indigenous peoples because it is only in this form that we can become independent and govern ourselves.

SAIIC: Can you comment on the continental struggle against 500 years of colonization?

AP: By being here and after exchanging views and talks with other people, I acknowledged the we the indigenous peoples all through the continent face the same problems such as land recognition, development, etc..

We must acknowledge how can we unify and defend ourselves as communities. First of all, indigenous peoples' lands must be recognized. Secondly, the state must respect cultures, different cultures from those which were brought to Latin America by the Europeans. Therefore we must communicate and join together in order to demand this from states and from the UN. We need to develop a means of communication. We need to know the problems of our brothers and sisters in other countries. In reference to

the campaign, we must develop the campaign in an autonomous form that is because the situation, even if it similar, is also unique in each country. We do have commonalities. We have to negate these state celebrations and come up with specific proposals, because for us the campaign does not end this October. In fact, this is only the beginning; the plans of the Indigenous Continental Alliance is to continue working for the rights of indigenous peoples and others with similar problems to those we have. Therefore the campaign for us goes beyond this year.

At the community level, we can talk about how to develop solutions, alternatives on development. In Colombia we are trying to find solutions for our communities.

SAIIC: What do these Continental Conferences mean for the communities?

AP: First of all, we discuss and share to analyze the situation of the indigenous people of the continent. We want to know what the specific problems of indigenous peoples are. Once we acknowledge this, we can start to think about solutions, alternatives which we ourselves formulate. Those encounters try to find this diagnosis of the problems, but also through them we solidify our links at the continental level.

In Colombia, since we have such a variety of indigenous peoples, we say that our country can achieve development once the communities and their cultures have developed to the utmost. This identity of the country is important to look at from different points of view, in the mutual harmony of different communities, so that we learn to live and recognize cultural and historical differences, which have been denied for 500 years. We consider that this identity of Colombia must be looked at from its territorially, regions, religions, anthologies, different cultures, rites, practices. We have to analyze what is Colombia, because throughout all of the years in Colombia others have been wanting to impose one culture, different to ours, and this is not possible. We are a country rich on cultural traits, therefore we must try to live in harmony among all of these cultures.

SAIIC: What does development mean for Indigenous Peoples in Colombia?

AP: In Colombia, with the so-called economic internationalization, or the economic aperture, the indigenous communities will suffer problems because most of these projects carried out in the name of development will exploit and explore the wealth, the natural resources, diversity, wild life. In the area of the Choco (Pacific coast) and the Amazon, the resources are being negotiated behind our backs. These negotiations are going to be carried out among the government and the large foreign companies. They do not consider the people living there. We are never consulted. We need to put international pressure on the government.

SAIIC: What is economic development for indigenous peoples in your opinion?

AP: First of all, let's look at the word development, for us development is not just economics, it is integral; that is to have autonomy, to have organizational and administrative capacity. In these terms, when promoted like this, we can realize development for the community as a whole. Most of the time when talking about economic development, it means to have economic possibilities for the betterment of our compañeros. For us, however, it would not just mean individually, but at the collective level; it means to propose solutions for the community. We have to generate many alternatives such as appropriation of technology, credit possibilities, adaptation of an economy proper to us, an economy that allows us to control our means, that allows the communities to develop their autonomy.

SAIIC: Can you talk to us about environmental organizations in Colombia?

AP: I believe that the environmental organizations and indigenous peoples have one thing in common, that is the defense of nature, of the environment. However, we indigenous peoples go beyond that, we defend human life too. We have to initiate a dialogue so that we can work for nature but also for human life. Environmental organizations can coordinate international actions so that projects are carried out only if indig-

enous peoples have been consulted. We really need to work on a dialogue in order to see how indigenous peoples can work together with environmental organizations.

SAIIC: Could you please talk about culture in Colombia?

AP: One of the main purposes of ONIC is to protect and promote indigenous peoples' cultures. We consider that culture is an authentic expression of peoples or a specific group; that is, their very own traditions, practices, form of government, values, organization, adaptation to changes maintaining their values. One of our achievements has been the recognition of a multi-ethnic society, country. For us, education is important because through it we learn to value our culture, because right now we have problems mainly with religious organizations which want to wipe out our cultures and create foreign one. Through education we value our cultures and learn the differences

SAIIC: What about oil companies in Colombia?

AP: There are now oil companies going to Colombia wanting to explore and exploit our lands in search of oil and other precious minerals. In our proposals to the constitutional reforms we proposed recognition of our right to the land; that is, the soil and subsoil, because for us land is property which belongs to the community and soil and subsoil are not separate, they are an integral part. However the state did not want to recognize this right, because they know there is enormous wealth, so there is an article which states that where there are minerals, oil, or other exploitable resources there will be consultations with the indigenous peoples. At this point the foreign companies are experimenting in many places in order to find oil and other resources. Where there is oil the government takes the land even if it belongs to the indigenous peoples. It is for this reason that we believe it is crucial that we organize so that we can defend ourselves, that we learn Spanish so that we can talk their language and conduct a dialogue.

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