

ALLIANCES FORMED AGAINST COLOMBIA'S PLAN PACIFICO



Photo by Camilo Hernandez-Fundacion Natura

Bulldozers clearing the forest for construction of the Pan-American Highway in Colombia

During the last decade, the Colombian Pacific Coast has been ransacked by mining and timber companies as well as thousands of colonists. The situation has become critical as the neo-liberal policies of the 90's have been implemented. Within this context, the Pacific is not only a region of high rentability due to its abundant natural resources; it has also become a strategic point through which the Colombian State strives to consolidate its insertion into the international markets linked by the Pacific Rim through a development strategy known as "Plan de Apertura Hacia el Pacifico" (The Opening of the Pacific Coast).

The Chocó region of the Colombian Pacific Coast is one of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems. It is covered by tropical rain forests, abundant in minerals and tropical woods. It has one of the highest concentrations of plant and animal species on

Earth and it is a potential source of hydroelectric energy and oil. In contrast to its richness in life forms and resources, the Chocó is inhabited by some 800,000 Afro-Colombians and 110,000 Indigenous peoples (predominantly Waunanas, Emberás, and Awas) living under conditions of extreme poverty.

Plan Pacifico seeks the investment of transnational capital for infrastructure development to include a vast network of roads, ports, and industrial centers in the Chocó, the Pan-American highway through the rain forest between Panama and Colombia, and the Bahía Málaga naval base which has effectively militarized the area. In addition, the construction of an inter-oceanic land bridge connecting the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, is planned for the near future.

For these reasons, the Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities of the Chocó have joined forces to defend their lands from impending devastation. For years, the Regional Indigenous Organization Emberá Waunana (OREWA), has struggled to obtain collective property rights over the 61 reserves that make up 16% of the Pacific Coast. Indigenous peoples are currently waiting for the "ley de Ordenamiento Territorial", a constitutional law which will define Indigenous territories throughout the country to be approved by Congress. The new constitution represents a significant step forward for Indigenous property rights as it aims to grant Indigenous territories the same degree of administrative autonomy enjoyed by Colombia's departments. However, under the new constitution, the law was supposed to have been drafted by the Colombian State and Indigenous organizations yet this has not been the case. The bill

has reached Congress twice without the inclusion of the document submitted by the Indigenous groups.

The Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific Coast face a similar situation. The special commission designated by the government to work on the bill was made up, for the most part, by members of the government. The resulting law (Ley 70) awards uncultivated lands near the rivers of the region, not the urban areas and farms they occupy, and contains clauses allowing for the construction of a network of roads within the allotted territories. This law ignores the legitimate and legal land rights of the peoples of the Pacific over the areas they have traditionally occupied and where they have constructed the Afro-Colombian society and culture.

Continuing a long-standing struggle, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations came together at the end of July in Quibdó, capital of the Chocó, to jointly look for solutions to a common problem. Members of the Afro-Colombian Organization of Popular Neighborhoods of Quibdó (OBAPO), and the Integral Campesino Association of Atrato (ACLA), petitioned the government for the legal ownership of their communal land holdings and the management of their natural resources. According to these organizations, the government's recognition of their property rights and their direct participation in the policies and development projects that affect them, is the only way to put an end to the environmental and social devastation brought about by the Plan Pacifico.

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