
Colombia: Oil palm plantations on usurped communal lands

The forests of the Colombian Pacific, the Pacific Region Territory, one of the areas of greatest biodiversity in the world, have been inhabited for many years now by Afro-descendent riparian communities. Their members were the last Colombian citizens to gain recognition of their right to the ownership of the territories that they possessed and used for centuries. The 1991 Constitution recognized their collective rights over the traditionally occupied territories but was accompanied from the start by a ferocious and systematic process of forced internal displacement that still continues in many places in the region and that has become even more serious with the increasing number of communities that are prevented from mobilizing and that have their entry of food, medication and fuel monitored.

As stated by Carlos Rosero, Candidate to the Chamber of Representatives of the Afro Communities “forced internal displacement is functional, not only to the war but also to the progress of mega-projects and monoculture tree plantations, such as the oil palm, that advance with the support of the national government in the north and the south of the Pacific Region Territory and other settlements of Afro-descendant communities in the country. Initial recognition by INCODER (the Colombian Institute for Rural Development) in March this year of the illegal advance of monoculture oil palm plantations in the collective territories of the Afro communities of Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó and the recent reversion depriving these communities of part of the lands that had been granted by deed to them collectively --unseizably, indefeasibly and inalienably-- is a clear example of the model of inclusion and insertion in the region, in their territories and their peoples of the predominant economic rationale; of the serious incoherence of the State in defining the protection and conservation of biological diversity versus simple and vulgar developmentism. What is even more serious, it is a further demonstration that the Colombian State has been unable to protect the rights of Afro-Colombians, bowing to those responsible for violations of rights. Not only does it leave them unpunished, but on top of it all, rewards them.”

In the year 2000, three years after having been displaced, the communities of the Jiguamiandú and Curvaradó river basins (the Choco region), received the deeds on 101,000 hectares that they had ancestrally occupied before their displacement. However, on their return these communities found that their territory had been invaded by industrial oil palm plantations.

Attempts made by the real owners to recover their farms were answered by death threats from the para-military personnel and the staff linked to the oil palm growing companies (URAPALMA, Palmas De Curvaradó, Palmas S.A., and Palmadó) in the midst of military operations that have endeavoured to get them to give up working the lands that the Government has allocated to the plantation of oil palms.

At the end of April this year, the preparation of land to sow oil palms was intensified, with the deforestation of native forests in the settlements of Caño Claro and La Cristalina in the Curvaradó Collective Territory and in the Urada sector in the surroundings of Jiguamiandó. For its part INCODER ended up by affirming that it had made a mistake by granting collective deeds and that consequently 10,162 hectares of private property should be deducted from these deeds.

The Inter-Ecclesiastical Commission for Justice and Peace considered that “it is alarming to observe that following more than 13 displacements suffered by the Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó Communities, following over 110 murders and disappearances, and having verified the illegality of oil palm plantations in the collective territories of the Afro communities, today the National Government contradicts its own conclusions to favour the economic interests of the oil palm growers.”

From a diametrically opposing standpoint, the communities’ social movement in the whole area of the Pacific rainforest conceives their territory as a “region-territory of ethnic groups,” that is to say an ecological and cultural unit amalgamated by the communities’ daily practices. The region-territory is conceived in terms of “corridors of life” that unite the communities, their activities and their natural environment. The corridors of life can connect mangrove ecosystems or extend from the middle of a river to the interior of a forest. Some are built around specific activities, such as traditional gold mining or the gathering of shells by women in the mangrove zones.

Furthermore, the territory-region is conceived as a political construction for the defence of the territories and their sustainability. Sustainability cannot be conceived in terms of scraps or of individual activities or only in economic terms: it must respond to the multidimensional nature of the ecosystem’s effective appropriation practices. Thus, it may be said that the region-territory hinges the life-project of the communities with the political project of the social movement. In the same way, the definition of biodiversity includes local principles of autonomy, knowledge, identity and economy. Nature is not “something which is out there” but is deeply rooted in the collective practice of human beings who feel connected to it in a comprehensive way.

The Afro communities have the conviction that the earth, as a living entity, must be collective. And they express it thus: “for us, the earth is mother and a crime is being committed against her giving rise to all the ills and miseries. Our mother, the mother of all living beings, is subjected, according to the law imposed, she has owners, she is private property. On subjecting her as property to be exploited, they took away her freedom to engender life and to protect and teach the place, the relationships and the time of every living thing... All we people are slaves together with animals and the beings of life, while we do not achieve our mother’s recovery of freedom.”

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