
Colombia: Expansion of the oil palm in a framework of Human Rights violation

The Colombia Plan has proved to be functional for oil palm economic groups (see WRM Bulletins Nos. 47 and 70). Military and para-military operations for the protection or promotion of the agro-industrial project have raided collective territories, built highways, felled forests and dug artificial canals. All this has been done in a setting of impunity and violation of Human Rights.

Since 2001, the Human Rights organization Justice and Peace has denounced the illegal planting of palm trees by the Urapalma S.A. company in at least 1,500 hectares in the Collective Territory of the Curvarado and its projection over the Jiguamiando. In spite of years of dialogue, legal action and verification commissions, nothing has been able to halt the destruction of the forest, nor the threats to the lives of its legitimate owners. In the report by the Inter-Ecclesiastic Justice and Peace Commission, the Community Council of the Jiguamiando and Families of Curvarado claim that during the last 15 days of April, the preparation of land to plant oil palm was intensified, with deforestation of native forests in the settlements of Caño Claro and La Cristalina in the Collective Territory of the Curvarado and by the Urada sector in the surroundings of the Jiguamiando in the lower Atrato and in the territories held by members of the communities with individual land deeds.

Although at the Audience of the Inter-American Human Rights Tribunal on 14 March the National Government engaged itself to take measures to halt the action of the palm-growing companies and to define mechanisms to solve the basic problem, what has been observed is accelerated progress in the preparation of new grounds, environmental destruction, the impossibility of Afro-descendent families returning to Curvarado and Jiguamiando and an increase in threats to the lives of the true owners who, faced with the lack of Government action, the negligence of the investigating body and the monitoring organizations, have attempted to recover their farms for survival.

The seventeenth Brigade and the Police from the region have been responsible by their action or omission for such violations of Human Rights. On the one hand, personnel linked to the palm-growing companies have intimidated the inhabitants – the legitimate owners – with the warning that they will kill 5 of them and set fire to the arbours of their dwellings if they continue to work on the properties that have already been assigned to the plantation of the oil palm.

The Inter-Ecclesiastic Justice and Peace Commission also stated that, in view of the impunity of what is happening in the Curvarado and Jiguamiando, it is no longer possible to believe in official policies regarding the environment or in respect for the Rights Consecrated in Law 70 for Black communities, or to expect that the circuit of impunity will cease: “once again it is observed that Rights for the impoverished only exist as a formality, in hundreds of papers or in electronic files. It is observed that extermination, persecution, the destruction of a human group develops the most diverse techniques, ranging from corporal torture to psychological torture, from forced disappearance to the destruction of settlements, from selective murder and genocide to the devastation of all types of life, from forced displacement to total and absolute uprooting. A State of Fact has been imposed, Law Does Not Exist. The truth is no longer possible. Ambition has been imposed over solidarity. The hatred of power prevails over love for the impoverished. The State has been eroded.”

In an urgent request for solidarity, the Community Councils of Jiguamiano and nine Curvarado communities are asking inter alia, for the following:

“- The urgent presence of international volunteers in the 3 Humanitarian Zones and support to the permanent presence of Justice and Peace in our Humanitarian Zones of "Pueblo Nuevo," "Bella Flor Remacho" and "Nueva Esperanza;"

- The participation of environmental and Human Rights organizations during the week of world presence in the territories of the Jiguamiando and Curvarado communities from 1 to 10 August 2005;

- To confirm the activities of the palm-growing companies during that week, to demand the suspension of work in the community territories and to hold a ceremony to show indignation;

- To show up the expropriation of land that the communities have been victim to, by means of the national and international mass media that will be convened to attend a field day.”

As a demand to the State and the Government, the communities request:

“- To address letters to the President of the Republic, Alvaro Uribe Velez, the Vice-President, Francisco Santos, the Minister of the Interior, Sabas Pretel De La Vega, the Minister of Agriculture Andrés Felipe Arias; the Minister of the Environment, Sandra Suárez Pérez; and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carolina Barco, demanding:

- That they honour their word pledged before the Inter-American Tribunal on 14 March in San Jose, Costa Rica, that they will immediately curb and suspend plantation of oil-palms in the Collective Territories of Jiguamiando and Curvarado.

- That they fully adhere to the Resolution of the Inter-American Human Rights Tribunal of 15 March regarding humanitarian assistance, the conditions for the return of the communities, respect for the Humanitarian Zones, provision of communication systems, and permanent presence of the Ombudsman in the Humanitarian Zones.

- That they create a Commission to Verify the Measure of Ecological Damages to the Collective Territory of the Jiguamiando and Curvado due to the effect of the plantation of oil palms and the possibilities for Afro-descendant communities to return to the area.

Article based on information from: “Jiguamiandó, amenazas de muerte por la siembra de palma”, Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, April 2005, sent by Justicia y Paz, e-mail: justiciaypaz@andinet.com