

Communities in resistance and Self Sufficiency, the return and recover of lands

Presentations Summary

Zilia Castrillon

About forty percent of Colombia's land is under control or under pressure from armed groups. This situation, the outcome of 43 years of war, has resulted in the expulsion almost four million Colombians from their territories, including one million people forcibly displaced since the government of current President Álvaro Uribe took office in 2002. The acts of violence and massive displacements of people from their homes are deeply rooted in land tenure conflicts, which in turn are caused by the newfound value of these lands as natural resources for exploitation by both national and international capital.

Companies that illegally and legally are using the forest for timber, planting large plantations of African palm trees and bananas and cattle ranching have played an important role in exacerbating violence against villagers.

Indeed the armed conflict in rural areas and woodlands has affected the survival of the agrarian structure of peasants, Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples. Many peasants have had to leave their homelands on the slopes of the mountain ranges, in the fertile valleys and in the tropical forests. In addition, ethnic communities are suffering the effects of the war in their ancestral lands, which are considered strategic for the permanence of their respective cultures and the conservation of biodiversity. Despite the complex obstacles they face, many of these uprooted individuals have been attempting to return to their homes and recover their property. The assistance and protection requirements of internally displaced persons, which should be guaranteed by the government, have been unrealistic, because in many instances governmental actions and policies have caused or contributed to the displacement. In such cases governmental organizations have not shown political will to assist displaced peoples, especially when displacement results from resource or territorial control disputes. This painful situation is compounded by the fact that individuals and economic groups have taken over vast areas of environmentally sensitive land to establish infrastructure and large production projects. In many cases the displaced cannot return home to resume livelihood activities due to lack of security and of governmental capacity. With almost all of its territory affected by forced displacement, the case of Colombia illustrates the most important aspects of this global problem.

There are social movements of internally displaced persons already organized to face the problem of displacement in light of the lack of governmental initiatives to protect them. To return to their territories or resettle, the internally displaced are calling on the Colombian Government to guarantee their security and safety and calling on the armed groups to not draw them into the conflict and to respect their right to life. As part of this strategy, some of the communities call themselves “peace communities” and some locations have call “humanitarian zones” or “peace territories” as a means of publicly affirming their rights as civilian population not to be involved in the conflict. The first experience of “peace communities” in Uraba or communities in resistance has been tragic for returnees, since they have been targeted by armed groups, but it was important to initiate policies within their own communities. Many *campesino* Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples have created “peace communities” in their locations, and some groups returned to their homelands, such as those from the Cacarica Basin. The Afro-Colombians have proposed to declare the Choco province –one of the “poorest” places in the country in economic terms but richest in biological and cultural terms– as a “territory of peace”, calling on all armed actors to leave the region, and for an action plan that would include the collective titling of territories and socioeconomic and political reforms.

I would like to present some experiences in active grassroots peace initiatives, many of which are linked to the rebuilding of sustainable productive alternatives. It has collected testimonies of *campesino* and ethnic communities who amid the conflict have created new alternatives to violence and enhanced sustainable social movements in Colombia. Even though such efforts have failed to prevent continued attacks by armed groups, they have created important grassroots precedents for resisting displacement since they see few chances of survival elsewhere.