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# Colombia's Indigenous Struggle to Avoid Nation's Internal War

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By Andrés Gaudin

Since early July, Colombia has been in an unusual situation. Worn down by an armed conflict that they do not relate to but which is being intensely fought on their lands, the Nasa or Páez indigenous group used sticks and stones to expel the military and the police sent by the government as well as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas.

The Nasa have lived in what today are the four strategic western departments along the Pacific coast (Nariño, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Chocó) since before the Spanish colonization in the 15th century. Before taking action, the indigenous addressed the parties involved. In their communication to the government, they demanded that President Juan Manuel Santos come to their territory to "negotiate the withdrawal of troops." They told the FARC to "get off of our lands."

Finally, on Aug. 14, Santos gave in to the pressure and came to the poor reserve of La María, 320 km southwest of Bogotá. The FARC had responded earlier. On July 20, FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño, better known as Timochenko, wrote, "If military operations cease—the bombing and strafing, the forced displacement, the land seizures, the crimes against the people, and the impunity—the existence of the guerrillas will no longer make sense. If the Army, the police, and the paramilitaries leave Cauca...we'll have no problem with leaving as well."

In the last two months, military actions have diminished notably on the Nasa lands. The government had first sent Interior Minister Federico Renjifo to dialogue, but the indigenous repeatedly left the negotiating table until finally, after two trips by Santos to La María, agreement was reached on an agenda and four working groups were set up. Despite constant interruptions caused by the withdrawal of the Indians who are negotiating, the working groups are looking at such issues as: 1) peace building; 2) territorial autonomy; 3) government and indigenous autonomy; and 4) developing economic, cultural, and social rights of the indigenous people.

The conversations—in which UN and Organization of American States (OAS) representatives are acting as guarantors and the government at the last minute added Francisco de Roux, the Jesuit provincial in Colombia—broke down again on Sept. 3, just as Colombian society celebrated the

long-awaited news that the government and the guerrillas would sit down to discuss ending the armed conflict.

### ***UNDP study shows plight of indigenous***

In the midst of this dialogue in which Nasa leaders have notably opted for silence on certain critical and vital aspects, such as the paramilitarism that batters the country, especially the four strategic departments on the Pacific coast, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) released a revealing report on Aug. 29 on the situation of the 102 indigenous groups in Colombia. The report said that more than six of every 10 of the nearly 1.4 million indigenous in Colombia suffer from structural poverty and that the majority of children and adolescents in the communities have chronic malnutrition.

Tania Guzmán, coordinator of the study "Pueblos indígenas: diálogo entre culturas" (Indigenous Peoples: Dialogue Among Cultures), said that 63% of indigenous people live below the poverty line. Of this group, 47.6% are living in extreme poverty. "The cases of people who die of hunger are numerous," said Guzmán.

The UN agency's study says that "some indigenous groups risk extinction. Of the 66 most vulnerable groups, 34 run the risk of disappearing, and not just because of poverty."

Among the causes that go beyond poverty, experts cite the armed conflict—Army, guerrillas, and paramilitary groups operating at the service of the mafias—the advancing agricultural frontier, logging, colonization, mining activities, drug trafficking, and megaprojects related to hydrocarbons, hydroelectricity, and mining. Between 2002 and 2010, the years of ex-President Álvaro Uribe's two-term administration, when paramilitary organizations flourished and the Army concentrated exclusively on repressing guerrilla groups, this convergence of factors caused more than 74,000 indigenous to abandon their lands, driven out by the violence.

"In Colombia, with a population of 46 million, 1.37 million are indigenous, 3.36% of the national population, and among them poverty levels are frightening, the worst indication of neglect, of longstanding contempt, of marginal and discriminatory treatment of these communities by both the state and society," Absalón Machado, another coordinator of the UNDP study, told the Associated Press.

### ***Government's emphasis on extractive industry also harms indigenous***

The UN experts said that the indigenous' drama was accented in recent decades "by the desire of successive governments to give greater security to investors and to promote uncontrolled extraction of natural resources, which required multiplying mining concessions and infrastructure megaprojects, expanding the agricultural frontier for developing industrial monocultures, and legalizing violent land expropriation by armed groups. More than 80% of indigenous territories were given in concession, without prior consultation, for the implementation of economic projects."

Of the 121 consultation processes between 1994 and 2009, 83 were with indigenous peoples, but the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC) says that not one example of good practices exists.

"On the contrary," says the study, "consultation has become the major cause of fights and divisions within the indigenous communities and organizations." As in eastern Bolivia, the multinationals that come to exploit oil and mineral riches promote the breakup of the communities, offering "gifts"—food, beverages, and money, basically—to thus weaken the communities' positions and to install themselves on their lands with minimal opposition.

"Despite protected rights," says the UNDP study, "the indigenous have no way to avoid the encroachment of their lands, including sacred places, such as hills and cemeteries."

The communities' economic activities— agriculture, small-scale mining (known as libertad de barequeo), logging—are all sustainable. Libertad de barequeo is a traditional form of informal mining carried out without machines or chemical processes, like leaching, which requires large amounts of water and highly contaminating chemicals (basically cyanide).

In the country, 33 districts have been designated for mineral exploitation (including gold, silver, bauxite, and copper). The study shows that, of the 21 concessions given to global mining companies to extract precious metals from indigenous lands, five companies had complaints for human rights violations lodged against them. The UNDP study did not name the companies.

Contracts, licenses, permits, and authorizations cover nearly 3 million hectares, but requests submitted and in process could soon expand the area to more than 30 million ha. The study says that those benefitting are always the same. Besides the huge multinationals, some Colombian individuals—it mentions specifically Mónica Uribe and Jaime Valdiri—receive a concession and then immediately transfer it to a corporation, so that it is practically impossible to know the real name of the business that, in the end, is in charge of the exploitation. Among the multinationals named are British firms AngloGold Ashanti and BHP Billiton; Canadian companies Seafields SAS and Calvista Gold Corporation, and the US firm Muriel Mining Corporation.

The UNDP says that the panorama is similar with hydrocarbons. But perhaps the most serious situation is that of the forests, which have become war booty. "The plunder of the forests," says the study, "became a common practice beginning in 2000, with the arrival of the paramilitaries, who took over control of the regional market in everything related to basic services, but also in the extraction of resources and their shipment to domestic markets" with high demand and purchasing power.

In 2006-2007, 147,000 cubic meters of timber were removed from the strategic department of Chocó, north of Valle del Cauca, the only department with both Caribbean and Pacific coasts and a border with Panama. Today, the volume exceeds 1.5 million cubic meters.

"Seventy-five percent pertains to the catival forest, which fulfills an important environment function in maintaining the course of the rivers and regulating the nutrients of aquatic life," concludes the report. "Parallel to the growth in resource exploitation on indigenous lands is the phenomenon of illegal cultivation in these areas and in the national parks, which results in dragging the indigenous into various forms of illegal activity, such as growing coca leaf and opium poppies," two of the items that support the businesses of the paramilitary organizations and that are not covered in the petition that the Nasa gave President Santos.