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## **Indigenous People in Colombia Protest Human Rights Abuses**

*by Guest*

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Violations of human rights and individual liberties are becoming entrenched as two constants that define the Colombian government and permeate society. At least that is the picture the world press is depicting as it writes of the multitudinous march of indigenous people that has been crossing the country since Oct. 11. This is also what the most renowned international humanitarian organizations and UN and Organization of American States (OAS) agencies denounce.

Those organizations are alarmed by the state repression, assassinations of young people and indigenous, systematized torture, disappearances, expansion of narcopolitics, and growing number of people displaced by an internal war that the government of President Alvaro Uribe refuses to recognize as such.

Successive purges in the intelligence services and the military would seem to confirm that the government assumes part of the responsibility. A social context in which work stoppages and strikes affect both the public and private sectors serves as the backdrop to events in the country.

### ***Indigenous groups press their demands to Uribe***

The Organizacion Nacional de Indigenas de Colombia (ONIC) says that, for four years, the 102 native ethnic groups had been asking to meet with Uribe to present him with a list of petitions calling for redress on a number of issues, from the return of ancestral homelands to the adherence to constitutional clauses referring to indigenous rights.

The meeting, which finally took place on Nov. 2 in the city of Cali, 487 km southwest of Bogota, was a failure. Since then, thousands of indigenous people who were prepared to end their protest decided instead to continue on to the capital, where many analysts believe they will be a powerful mobilizing force. "The indigenous people have become the conveyor belt of the social movements of Colombia," said anthropologist Dario Fajardo to BBC Mundo.

From the broadest perspective, the indigenous are mobilizing to reclaim the rights to their native homelands and for a negotiated and dignified settlement to the armed conflict that has wracked the country for more than four decades.

The main actors in this conflict have been the state military apparatus, private armies of the drug traffickers and the large landowners, death squads, paramilitary groups, and guerrilla organizations.

The only role the indigenous play in those groups is as their victims, both in lives lost and in being displaced from their land.

Despite the criticisms leveled by the indigenous, including against the rebels, Uribe insisted recently that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) is hidden behind the ONIC. Besides condemning human rights violations, ONIC opposes the signing of the pending free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US (see NotiSur, 2008-04-18) and the continuation of US military assistance under Plan Colombia.

ONIC also denounces the consequences of what the government calls its "democratic security policy" (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13 and 2006-09-01) and rejects a series of bills under consideration by the Congress that, it says, "undermine respect for Colombia's ethnic and cultural diversity."

Above all, ONIC demands full respect for the constitutional articles regarding native peoples. Under the 1991 Constitution, aboriginal authorities represent the power of the state in their "protected areas" (self-governed and collectively owned territories), which cannot be searched or occupied by the military or the police without previous consultation with the indigenous organization.

### *Constitutional rights ignored*

Nevertheless, the rights enshrined in the Constitution have remained "on paper only," and therein lies the discontent, said lawyer Luis Carlos Osorio of Fundacion Hemera, quoted by BBC Mundo.

The issues on which the government did not consult the indigenous communities included concessions to multinational companies for oil, mining, and timber exploitation on indigenous lands, tourism-development programs that include sacred indigenous sites, and legislative proposals that have been passed or are being debated in Congress, such as the Mining Code, the Water Law, the Rural Development Statute, and the Forestry Law (in the end aborted in the Congress.)

On Oct. 25, a week before the failed meeting with Uribe, an Associated Press journalist who accompanied the marchers summarized the positions of the two sides as follows: "The ONIC has a five-point agenda with 22 distinct themes with demands such as turning over at least 2 million hectares of land, saying that 445,000 indigenous, 27% of the total native population of 1.3 million people, do not have a protected area recognized by the state.

The government says that the indigenous, a little more than 2% of the population, have more than 30 million ha of Colombia's 115 million ha. But ONIC says that nearly 80% of that land cannot be used for agriculture because it is in jungles and barren plains, which is why they are also demanding soft credit for cultivation programs.

Statistics released by ONIC and international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Servicio de Paz y Justicia (Serpaj), indicate that, since Uribe took office in 2002, his democratic security policy has taken a tragic toll on indigenous people: 1,253 deaths and 54,000 people displaced from their ancestral homes.

The 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel wrote a letter to Uribe accusing the president of being "a warrior, not a peacemaker." In a report titled "Colombia: 'Leave us in peace!' Targeting civilians in the internal armed conflict," AI asks the international community to "suspend all military assistance and all transfers of military and paramilitary equipment to the Colombian armed forces until the recommendations of the UN High commissioner for Human Rights are fully implemented so there is no longer a clear risk of such assistance and equipment being used to facilitate serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Colombia."

Since 2002, the Uribe government has received more than US\$5 billion in US military aid and training. HRW said that Uribe is embarking on a campaign to discredit the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) in order to obstruct the actions of the judiciary and stop its investigation of crimes committed by the paramilitaries and their accomplices.

Uribe accused the humanitarian organizations of trying to thwart his security policy. He specifically referred to AI, HRW, and Serpaj, but made no reference to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay, or to the OAS' Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), which were equally critical of the policy of democratic security. Both organizations referred in particular to the chain of assassinations and disappearances.

In recent weeks, the number of victims has increased with the revelation that dozens of youths were recruited in marginalized areas and later armed to then be assassinated in fabricated confrontations with the military (see NotiSur, 2008-10-10). This allowed the military operations officers to win awards in a macabre ranking of repressive effectiveness.

The century-old Ecuadoran daily El Comercio quoted Pillay as saying that extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances of people seem to be a "systematic and widespread" practice by Colombia's US-backed security forces, and which could be categorized as a "crime against humanity." Nor did Uribe refer to a scathing report released by the Centro de Estudios Publicos para las Relaciones Internacionales y Desarrollo (Cepri) and prepared by the Observatorio de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Humanitario Coordinacion Colombia, Europa, Estados Unidos.

The report rebutted the president's denial of the existence of an armed conflict, saying that "the existence of a prolonged armed conflict...worsens the situation of sociopolitical violence in the framework in which violations of the right to life have reached levels intolerable in any democratic society." Meanwhile, as the indigenous, whose estimated numbers ranged from 8,000 (Miami's El Nuevo Herald) to 40,000 (BBC Mundo and Colombian daily El Espectador), marched, first toward Cali and then in the direction of Bogota, sugarcane cutters maintained a prolonged strike demanding improved labor conditions, workers in the tax and customs services and the electoral organization asked for a salary increase, and judicial-system workers demanded to be able to work free from all political pressure.

In this social context, and worn down by the denunciations, Uribe had to accept the resignation of the director of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) Maria del Pilar Hurtado, accused of spying on the leaders of the opposition political parties, and he fired the head of the Army, Gen. Mario Montoya. Pagina 12 reported that Montoya was fired because of a story in The

Washington Post, based on declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents, accusing him of arming paramilitary groups. Regarding Hurtado, Uribe said, "He was the victim of a cunning trap." Of Montoya, a former instructor at the Pentagon's School of the Americas, Uribe said, "He is an honest soldier of the country."

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