Colombian Guerrillas Offer Campesino Protesters Support

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Colombian Guerrillas Offer Campesino Protesters Support

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Category/Department: Colombia

Published: 2013-08-02

Colombia's strategic northeastern region of Catatumbo, on the border with Venezuela, has become a volcano, which, after years of lying dormant, now seems close to erupting. Since June 10, campesinos have been peacefully protesting against a government policy that threatens their only source of sustenance—coca fields—and they are specifically demanding that their lands be declared a Zona de Reserva Campesina (ZRC). ZRCs are a legal concept established in 1994 to promote agricultural development through work cooperatives, which receive state subsidies until they are able to successfully operate on their own.

But the protesters encountered the intransigence of President Juan Manuel Santos and a surprising government crackdown that has thus far resulted in the deaths of six campesinos, with dozens more wounded, and several towns in Catatumbo basically occupied by military and police forces.

In this context, artisanal miners in the region and throughout the country—some 2 million families work extracting gold, coal, and sand—and small family coffee producers—560,000 families—began an indefinite strike on July 16 with their own demands while also expressing support for those of the campesinos.

**Talks with protesters "at an impasse"**

After the third breakdown in the dialogue initiated with the rural workers, Interior Minister Fernando Carrillo remarked laconically, "We're at an impasse."

On July 23, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)—who, since November 2012, have been participating with the government in an auspicious peace dialogue (NotiSur, March 15, 2013)—surprisingly offered the campesinos armed support, an offer they had never made to any sector since their founding in 1962.

The campesino mobilization began with a simple demand: asking the government to set aside its commitments with the US in the war on drugs and discontinue its policy of destroying coca fields, the only source of sustenance for tens of thousands of families who have small plots that they call "subsistence crops." The campesinos are not opposed to an eventual definitive elimination of the coca fields but ask that first a substitute economy be developed, and they see the ZRC as an ideal starting point.

As part of the protests, the campesinos blocked various roads. The government agreed to begin a dialogue but set as a prior condition that the Catatumbo workers lift the roadblocks. After that, the crackdown was unleashed although no one could explain exactly how it started. What is clear, and dramatic, is that four campesinos died from gunshot wounds in the protests between June 22 and June 25.

**OHCHR finds excessive force, blames security forces for deaths**

The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Colombia released a statement saying that it had confirmed that, during the crackdown of the protests in which four
campesinos died, shots were fired from high-powered rifles usually used by security forces, which
would indicate "an excessive use of force" against the demonstrators.

The government did not expect the UN to order an independent investigation and, given
its conclusions, reacted nervously. Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón said that it was
"irresponsible" to make any statement about the campesino deaths "before the attorney general has
determined the circumstances of those deaths."

On July 16, hours before receiving UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay in
Bogotá, President Santos reacted to the UN statement with as much nervousness as Pinzón. In
barely disguised retaliation, he said that he was considering definitively closing the UN mission
in Colombia "because the need for such an office has gradually disappeared; Colombia has made
enough progress to say that we no longer need more UN human rights offices." Santos also
supported what his minister had said, adding that "no one should speak of those tragic events until
the attorney general speaks."

Finally, on July 18, a report by Spanish news agency EFE said that "the Colombian attorney general,
in a communiqué, said that it had determined that three of the four homicides of the of Catatumbo
campesinos were caused by projectiles fired from high-velocity weapons, consistent with the use of
automatic or semi-automatic rifles." That is, weapons used by state security forces. On July 17, two
other campesinos died after being shot by "an automatic or semi-automatic rifle."

Suddenly, northeastern Colombia had become a microcosm of the entire country. Poverty,
inequality, marginalized campesinos, illegal mining, coffee growers left on their own, and human
rights violations come together in those six municipalities in which the absence of the state is
extreme.

In El Colombiano, a conservative newspaper in Medellín, the country's second-largest city, Juan
David Ramírez Correa painted a picture of the region that speaks for itself. "Catatumbo," he wrote
on July 16, "has an immense geostrategic value that illegal groups have known how to exploit
perfectly, while the state looks the other way. Its lands, though seemingly arid, are rich in minerals
and bountiful when planted. Paradoxically, that fertility is evident in the more than 4,000 hectares
planted with coca, providing subsistence to thousands of campesino families, raised in poverty and
witnesses to a longstanding confrontation among the guerrillas, the Army, and the paramilitaries,
as well as those who use the routes for drug trafficking and smuggling with Venezuela. In short, the
confluence of factors has made the area a forgotten land, like many others in this rich country where
the state seems to not exist."

**Campesino association asks for asylum in Venezuela**

On June 21, the day before Colombian and Venezuelan leaders met to "unfreeze" bilateral relations
that had become almost untenable, the Asociación de Campesinos del Catatumbo (ASCAMCAT)
sent a letter to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro asking for territorial refuge because they
were "fearful that the repression could increase that has already claimed the lives of four of our
compañeros, with dozens more wounded or jailed."

In the letter, published by local media and international agencies, the campesinos describe the
present situation and say that the "region is in a profound economic, social, and humanitarian crisis,
the result of decades of state abandonment, which is exacerbated by war, militarization, forced eradication of coca fields, and systematic violations of human rights by the state."

The letter goes on to say, "We are calling for recognition of campesinos, full access to civil and political rights and to economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights to live in dignity. Through this mobilization, we are demanding the right to land and to the exercise of territoriality for our communities through a Zona de Reserva Campesina, a concept recognized in Colombian law."

When the group gave the letter to the media, the association's spokesperson Juan Carlos Quintero added drama to the situation by explaining, "If we are able to set up an international camp in Venezuela, the first to go there will be women, the elderly, and children, so that they will not be affected by the repression of the Colombian security forces."

At least publically, neither government responded. The next day at the summit, held in Venezuela, social organizations from Tibú entered the fray, adding to the government's discomfort. Tibú is one of the six municipalities that make up the Catatumbo region, and its 40,000 inhabitants have until now suffered the most from the roadblocks, which have created serious problems for obtaining food and fuel supplies.

On July 23, all the social groups asked Congress president Sen. Juan Fernando Cristo to look for a way out of the—at that time—42-day blockade "that affects productive sectors and the education of children and young people, among other social groups that have had countless costs."

In putting the ball in the government's court, the civil organizations called for "justice for the campesinos' demands" and pointed out, "with mixed feelings, born out of desperation, the need to look for a negotiated solution in the face of the urgent social time bomb that could explode at any moment, leaving serious and deep wounds."

At almost the same time, in Havana, Cuba, where the government and the guerrillas are talking about how to achieve peace in Colombia, the FARC released a message of solidarity for the Catatumbo campesinos. "They can count on our ranks, our weapons, and our fighters to accompany them to the final victory," it said.

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