

Report from Colombia emergency conference “Global Crisis, Human Rights and Agrofuels”

August 2007

We think of conventions as being rather dry affairs in which information is exchanged and networks expanded. The emergency convention called and hosted by Justicia Y Paz in Bogota in August was different. From the first morning, there was an urgency in the air. Speakers ranging from campaigners and activists, to church members to academics took to the floor and conveyed in ardent terms their informed view on the situation. It wasn't until late into the first day that the campesinas (small farmers), some of whom had traveled for several days by bus to get there, took to the floor. The tone of the meeting changed immediately as we heard about their eye-witness accounts of multiple acts of violence including murder at the hands of the paramilitary and the military. We heard how campesinas had been driven off their land, and we heard accounts of ‘bonded labour’, akin to slavery. Many of the campesinas spoke with the harrowing resonance of people who have experienced such violence first hand. Many questions were asked of the campesinas, often by members of different communities. It was clear to me as an outsider that such similar experiences across many communities were testimony to a broader government land grab plan; a violent story of huge proportions. Later I was to find out that 200,000 campesinas are dispossessed each year in Colombia. Many of them end up in bonded labour, shanty towns, or having to stake out territories in virgin forest further jeopardizing this unique ecosystem.

My opportunity to present on behalf of Biofuelwatch came towards the end of the second day by which time I found myself hurriedly changing my presentation to convey the almost absent agenda of climate change. I showed a NASA map of the shrinking Arctic, Polar Bears stranded on melting ice bergs, the melting Siberian permafrost, hurricanes, New Orleans submerged and Amazon wild-fires. As I explained the misinformation of promoting biofuels as a way of tackling climate change many of the 100 or so delegates looked on in disbelief. I ended by speaking of the EU moratorium call on agrofuels. Afterwards I was touched by how many of the people from Jiguamindo and Curvarado came to speak with me. One said they had not seen such pictures before. The next day, a member of Justicia y Paz spoke of how his eyes had been opened to climate change and wished to make the presentation available to others.

Being English-speaking I was heavily dependent on and grateful to the bilingual delegates who kindly and generously translated Spanish for me. On occasions I lost some of the detail but the broad issues came through loud and clear.

The conference finished with a high-profile plenary session consisting of representatives from Fedepalma (one of Colombia's prominent biofuel corporations), lawyers fighting against the human rights violations, a speaker from the World Rainforest Movement and another from Justicia Y Paz. Fedepalma opened with their polished yet ill-conceived PR slide show. This was followed by the other speakers who spoke at length on their specialties. Afterwards audience questions exposed the misinformation, inconsistencies and downright lies conveyed in the Fedepalma presentation. In fact, this presentation was so controversial it dominated the entire debate. The audience proved more than a match even for the Fedepalma “ecological expert” seated amongst the audience. Their platform was demolished not by fierce attack but by cogent argument exposing their selective statistics. A few days later, just before I was about to leave, Peter Bunyard mentioned that we had been invited to speak with Fedepalma at their offices. We declined this invitation, feeling (from what we had witnessed at the closing plenary) that we would surely become capital for their latest PR campaign.

The next day we left for the Choco region on the North-West side of the Andes. We flew over breathtaking forests to arrive amidst banana plantations as far as the eye could see. It took nearly six hours to travel by bus and four-wheel drive vehicles from the airport to the site of the Curvarado

community. Along the whole length lay only plantations and pasture land. This was evidence enough of the much talked of two-thirds destruction of the Choco forests, with oil palm expansion now identified as the leading cause. Peter Bunyard, renowned scientist on the Amazon who attended the convention told me that the Andean forests were amongst the most biodiverse forests on Earth. Later I was to learn that they are home to more than 7,000 species, including 100 endemic bird species.

We passed several rivers en route, all of them reduced to just a narrow stream winding through expansive valleys. I wondered if this was linked to the Colombian water shortages spoken of by climate scientists. Just a few years ago Colombia was one of the most water-rich countries in South America. Even in the summer months Colombian rivers would be swollen with Andean melt-water. Today this is not the case; the Andean glaciers, now much reduced, no longer provide a steady summer flow. Later, close to the Curvarado community we did have the pleasure of swimming in the only swollen river we came across; the rains of the previous days probably the primary contributor.

The military were conspicuous, undoubtedly communicating ahead as we progressed along our slow 6 hour journey. In the small town where we changed vehicles we were surrounded by half a dozen military, on another occasion our passport details were recorded painstakingly. At one desolate spot military personnel stopped our vehicles and indicated to a few of our number, to alight. They then exchanged a few words amongst themselves before ordering those selected from our group back into the vehicles. The feeling of helplessness while shepherded into a region where the Inter-Church Commission Justicia Y Paz and international NGOs have documented 113 killings and evictions is something which will stay with me. As we neared the Curvarado village we saw the sign 'Zona Humanitaria' (Humanitarian Zone) marking the area where communities are reclaiming their land and cutting down illegally planted oil palms. Finally we arrived to a warm welcome. Joy emanated from this makeshift camp where children ran free but where malnutrition was evident. The community held a meeting with us until late. We heard accounts of the community's initial struggle to hold onto their land before being forced to flee, and now on returning several years later, we heard stories of their defiance as they reclaimed their land by symbolically hacking down, so far, 10 hectares of oil palms.

The next day we rose early and left camp soon after dawn. After walking for about an hour we arrived at the land which had been their home, and which was now occupied by palm oil plantation workers – themselves campesinas who had been forced off their own land and were forced to work on the plantation for low wages and under poor conditions. As we walked, one of the community elders pointed to remains of their previous inhabitation; concrete water tanks, corrugated iron roofs etc sitting incongruously amongst the palm. Outside the schoolhouse which they had built many years earlier and which was now occupied by a plantation worker family, one of the elders brought his narration to an abrupt halt. He had spotted an armed guard within earshot and felt very uncomfortable about being overheard. We walked on to the area where his own house had stood since 1962 when he first claimed the land, becoming the founder of the community. Now, less than 10 years after their evacuation, there was no trace of the house save the iron roof discarded beneath the fast-maturing oil palms.

I walked back with the brother of the elder who led us there, a strong middle-aged man who up to this point had said little. He began to share his own painful story. He spoke of the time when evacuation became necessary. They had hung on amidst death threats and murders whilst encouraging the women and young children to leave the land for their safety. Then one day he was walking back along the river and saw the decapitated body of a fisherman with the arms tied behind. As he came closer he found the abdomen cut open and the head of the man placed inside. He recognized the face as that of his second brother. He buried him and he, along with the last members of the community left with a vow to some day return. The 1990's massacres have kept them away for close to a decade. Now they had returned that their safety was tenuous and depended almost entirely on Western presence and media interest.

As we began again to walk away with the same slow pace of our arrival we too had become emotionally engaged in the mourning for lives, land and dignity. On the return journey we visited the community burial site. Half had been simply dug and planted with oil palm as if it were agricultural land. Ancestral remains had been tossed across to the intact burial site where they were observably scattered.

As we approached the camp again, we heard news greeted with some relief. We were told that a vice-minister had signed an agreement allowing the community to keep the 10 hectares which they had cleared of oil palm on the condition that further cutting stopped immediately. For now a moment's respite; a truce ironically called by a government which has no legal claim to the land: The Afro-Colombian communities hold the legal land titles. The occasion was marked by beginning to replant the land with food crops. Unskilled and armed with no more than wooden sticks, some maize seed and lots of enthusiasm we were graciously encouraged to commemorate this occasion by leading the seed-planting.

Later in the day we again came together for a last meeting. Much was said in support of the palm-cutting and visions expressed for the future. The positive news of the day was only mildly noticeable in the community spirit; they seemed to know innately that the politics would soon shift again. Our delegation listened intently and contributed ideas. The community too listened and expressed themselves. Some in the community with an ear for music sang songs of protest and lament. When we finally departed it was a sobering moment as they expressed their gratitude. We knew we were leaving behind people whose lives were precariously balanced. Our continued involvement would be the most important gift we could offer.

Deepak Rughani