

Food First BACKGROUNDER

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

WINTER 2007

VOLUME 13 • NUMBER 4

Colombia palm oil biodiesel plantations: A “lose-lose” development strategy?

by Zack Zimbalist

“We think biofuels can further our core mission, which is to bring economic opportunity and a better quality of life to the region’s low-income majority.”

— LUIS ALBERTO MORENO, PRESIDENT INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

Palm oil production for biodiesel is expanding rapidly in the global south. While not as prolific as Indonesia and Malaysia, Colombia is the fourth largest palm oil producer in the world and the largest in Latin America. The Colombian government—in collaboration with paramilitaries and palm agroindustries—is violently removing Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and peasant communities to expand monoculture palm plantations in an effort to demobilize paramilitaries and stimulate economic development in rural areas. With substantial financial backing from the US International Agency for Development (USAID) and the Colombian Agrarian Bank,² and institutional support from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB),³ the palm oil agroindustry is reaping large profits at the expense of the food sovereignty of small farmers and marginalized communities.

Land Rights Violations

Law 70 of the Colombian Constitution defines and protects the rights of Afro-Colombians to their communal lands in the Colombian Pacific region. In 2000, the government awarded a collective land title of over 100,000 hectares to black and peasant communities in northern Chocó.⁴ Despite land titles and legal protection guaranteed by the Colombian Constitution and penal code as well as international conventions, courts have been reluctant to intervene in cases of raids and illegal land seizures by paramilitaries and palm oil companies.

Along the Curvarado and Jiguamiando River basins, locals have survived for generations on their own maize and rice varieties. Expelled from their land, communities are struggling to preserve their traditional food systems and livelihoods.



Photo by Annalise Romoser

Enrique Pedro and neighbors reclaiming their land.

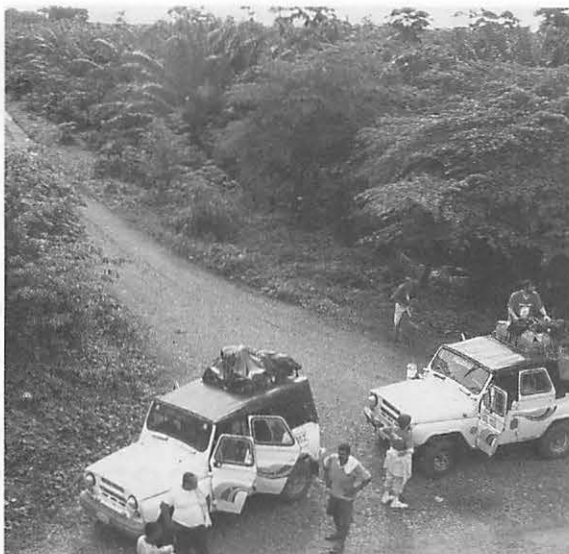
Violent removal of Afro-Colombian communities

Government-sponsored land evictions in league with paramilitaries and palm agribusinesses have been especially disastrous for Afro-Colombians; who make up 85 percent of the Chocó population.⁵ According to The Colombian Rural Development Institute (Incoder), 93 percent of the land under palm cultivation by large companies such as Urapalma, Palms of Curvarado, Palms Inc. and Palmado is located in the collective territorial zone of black communities. Almost all traditional villages have been wiped out and are being repopulated with former paramilitaries and outsiders.⁶

Palm oil development for paramilitary demobilization

Colombian President Álvaro Uribe Vélez endorses palm oil development as a strategy for territorial control and paramilitary demobilization. He argues that newly generated jobs on palm plantations in volatile regions provide a way out for many paramilitaries.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) also supports palm production to combat poverty and create a more peaceful environment for rural workers.⁷ Colombian Luis Alberto Moreno, the IDB's current president, is Uribe's close ally. Formerly the Colombian ambassador to the US, Moreno is co-chair of The Interamerican Ethanol Commission with former Florida governor Jeb Bush. Both Bush and Moreno champion biofuel production in the Global South to create jobs, stimulate domestic economies, and slow climate change.⁸



Colombian palm plantation.

Photo by Annalise Romoser

Because the Bank's president is one of the key figures leading the campaign for biofuels development, it is no surprise that the IDB is promoting biofuels in Latin America and plans to contribute millions of dollars to complement private sector investment to expand production.⁹ While no projects are currently funded in Colombia, an IDB press release stated, "the Bank's Inter-American Investment Corporation is considering financing a \$20 million palm-based biodiesel enterprise that will eventually produce up to 100,000 tons of fuel per year."¹⁰ In line with President Uribe, "the IDB regards investment in medium- and long-term crops [such as palm] as strategies for governability or territorial control in the face of problems such as guerrilla conflict [and] political violence."¹¹ However, the plan to increase stability and demobilize paramilitaries has been largely unsuccessful, as many paramilitaries retain their arms and instigate conflict with local communities.¹²

Consolidation of Palm Agroindustry

In the palm development strategy, the palm agroindustry's profits safeguarded at the expense of the food sovereignty of local populations.

Government initiatives and monetary backing from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Colombian Agrarian Bank,¹³ and national investment funds have accelerated the consolidation of Colombian lands and the agricultural market into the hands of a few large palm producers.

Palm companies have violated constitutional laws protecting black communities' land rights to increase their profits. The Urabá Union of Palm Growers (Urapalma) corporation—endowed with substantial

resources and loans from the Colombian Agrarian Bank¹⁴ and USAID—currently controls 2,723 hectares of African palm on land that Afro-Colombians of Chocó hold legal title to.¹⁵ According to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Urapalma has invaded private property and promoted palm cultivation on black communities' land, contracting the army and armed civilians to defend its factories and seed banks.¹⁶

Resistance

The palm agroindustry's expansion has galvanized community members to challenge palm monocultures. Indigenous groups and Afro-Colombians have chopped down oil palm trees on their collectively-held land and planted corn to assert their food sovereignty. In Chocó, they have formed community councils to promote food self-sufficiency and land recovery while initiating proceedings to challenge illegal land evictions. With some success, the NGO Inter-ecclesiastical Commission for Justice and Peace and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have pressured the Colombian government to defend the displaced communities of the Urabá region of Chocó.¹⁷

Agrofuels Moratorium: A Call to Action

The Colombian government has ignored the violent displacement of indigenous and black populations from their legally protected land rights. International Human Rights organizations, NGOs, and foreign governments importing Colombian palm oil can be a powerful force in pressuring the Colombian government to protect communities against armed invasions and human rights abuses. As an international finance

institution funded by taxpayers, the Inter-American Development Bank is supposed to ensure sustainable, equitable development. Because it helps attract international investments in Colombia, some groups are targeting the IDB in an effort to make it reconsider its support of palm oil development.

Organizations throughout the Americas are calling for a moratorium on large-scale monocultures such as palm oil for diesel. And farm and environmental organizations includ-

ing Via Campesina and the National Family Farm Coalition are advancing local food sovereignty. To find out more about how you can support a moratorium on what we call agro-fuels, or to pressure the IDB, visit the following web sites:

<http://madre.org/articles/int/agrofuels.html>

http://ran.org/what_we_do/rainforest_agribusiness/spotlight/launch/

<http://www.foodfirst.org/node/1785>

<http://biceca.org>

U.S. and E.U. Appetite for Alternatives to Oil Fuels Human Rights Violations in Colombia

By Annalise Romoser, the U.S. Office on Colombia

For over 50 years Enrique Petro farmed in the northwestern region of Urabá, Colombia, eking out a living through tenacious work in the thick and inhospitable jungle. He was able to provide food for his family and earn enough money to buy materials to build a small home. "It was a healthy and peaceful time for us, and our children were well taken care of," recalls Don Petro (sic).⁽¹⁾

In 1997, Don Petro was violently driven from his farm by *Operation Genesis*, a Colombian military and paramilitary incursion mounted by the government to drive insurgent guerillas from the region. Many farmers were massacred and thousands were forced to flee their homes. Land that once sustained the food crops of thousands of families, and a delicate jungle ecosystem, is now lined with giant palm plants whose fruits are har-

vested to produce palm oil for export to the U.S. and the E.U.

Don Petro's experience is one of countless similar stories from six different palm-growing regions in the country. A recent report by *Human Rights Everywhere*, notes that forced disappearance, murder, massacres, extortion and violation of international humanitarian law are just some of the numerous violations being carried out in connection with Colombia's palm industry.⁽²⁾

Farming and Afro-Colombian communities throughout Colombia have taken a public stand against the crop, citing food insecurity, environmental damage and the inability of small-scale farmers to participate equally with large companies in the palm industry.⁽³⁾ At the heart of their concerns are the continual violations of territorial and human rights at all levels of palm pro-

duction. Don Petro explains, "The military protects the palm crops but not our rights...do you think we deserve to live like this? We are pushed off the land we farmed and left with palm."⁽⁴⁾

In 2000, Don Petro returned home, cut down illegally-grown palm on a portion of his land, and re-established his community by inviting neighbors to return to farm and live by his side.

After numerous visits to Washington DC, and with continued support from national and international organizations, Don Petro is on the brink of having his land returned by the Colombian government. Despite his personal victory, national and international interests continue to expand palm production without adequate assurances that other stolen land will be returned, and that human and territorial rights will be respected in the process.

Notes

- 1 "IDB targets \$3 billion in Private Sector Biofuel Projects," Inter-American Development Bank website, Press Release, 4/2/07
- 2 Oil Palm: From Cosmetics to biodiesel Colonization lives on. World Rainforest Movement. August 2005
- 3 "The healing power of a cash crop," Inter-American Development Bank website, Web Story, 7/23/07
- 4 Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, "La Tramoya: Derechos Humanos y Palma Aceitera en Curvaradó y Jiguamiandó, Caso Tipo 5." Pages 148-150. October, 2005. Justicia y Paz (www.es.geocities.com/justiciaypazcolombia).
- 5 Zilia Castrillón, "Indigenous and black communities of Chocó are trying to recover their lands;" IPS (Latin America), 6/25/07
- 6 "Colombian daily links US-backed crop replacement scheme to displacement, AUC," BBC Monitoring Latin America, 9/6/06
- 7 "The healing power of a cash crop," Inter-American Development Bank website, Web Story, 7/23/07
- 8 Florida, Brazil and IDB Launch Interamerican Ethanol Commission. The Launch, FTAA press-room. FTAA website. 12/18/07
- 9 Paulina Novo, "Biocombustibles, agrocombustibles, las Instituciones Financieras Internacionales y inversión privada: una panorámica general," 9/11/07
- 10 "IDB targets \$3 billion in Private Sector Biofuel Projects," IDB website, Press Release, 4/2/07
- 11 Javier Marín Rodríguez, "The geopolitics of the development banking system in Colombia. Natural resources and Amazonia in the hemisphere's new order," Censat Agua Viva-FoE. Colombia 2002. Cited in "The flow of palm oil Colombia-Belgium/Europe," Human Rights Everywhere, Nov 2006
- 12 Ricardo Carrere, "Colombia: Communities eradicate oil palm plantations to repossess their territory," World Rainforest Movement, WRM's bulletin #121, August 2007
- 13 Annalise Romoser, "US and EU Appetite for Alternatives to Oil Fuels Human Rights Violations in Columbia," The US Office on Colombia. Her source: Personal Interviews with USAID and Bank Information Center officials. July 2007.
- 14 "Colombian daily links US-backed crop replacement scheme to displacement, AUC," BBC Monitoring Latin America, 9/6/06
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.

[BOX]

- 1. Romoser, Annalise. Personal Interview with Enrique Petro. July 2007.
- 2. Human Rights Everywhere. The Flow of Palm Oil Colombia-Belgium/Europe. A Study from a Human Rights Perspective. April 2007.
- 3. Asociacion de Afro-Colombianos Desplazados, Procesos de Comunidades Negras, Washington Office on Latin America. Six Reasons Why Afro-Colombian Grassroots Leaders are Opposed to the Cultivation of African Palm. October 2006.
- 4. Ibid. Romoser, Annalise.

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