

Resisting Extinction



e-mail: info@colombiasolidarity.org.uk

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Bogotá, the capital. "Stand Firm" *Images: Colombia Informa*

On 25 April social movements across Colombia held a 24 hour national strike against government policies, and especially President Iván Duque's mis-named 'National Development Plan' which will give even more access over to multinational companies, especially in oil, mining and water. The strike saw popular mobilisations across the country. A multiplicity of social movements, indigenous organisations, women's movement, afro-colombians, students and trade unions all united in struggle.

The demands of the strike include an end to repression, de-

fence of the minimum wage and the right to popular assembly. The last is particularly significant as under a constitutional provision scores of localities have voted in referenda against the incursion of extractivist projects. Neo-fascist Duque wants to remove this right which has been used to defend the environment.

The national strike demanded the government honour previous commitments, to build a hospital in the predominantly African descendant city Buenaventura, and to restore some of the land stolen from indigenous communities. In the south west indigenous communities have been on strike

for a month, their *Minga* has blocked the Pan American highway as a tactic in the fight for the liberation of Mother Earth.



Pasto, South West. Youth joined indigenous and *campesino* small farmers in popular assemblies.

Infrastructure, Corruption and Conflict in Colombia



Initially promoted in Uribe's government (2002-2010) and consolidated as a 'development locomotive' during the Santos administration (2010-2018), infrastructure development has been promoted as the way to bring many benefits to Colombia: economic and social growth, access to rural areas, and territorial peace over the regions. However, most projects have either collapsed, increased social conflicts or are mired in corruption. As the cases unravel, underlying problems on exploitation and abuse from traditional Colombian elites are becoming more evident.

The Energy Dam 'Hidroituango' on the Cauca River (above), is proposed as the only possible solution to cope with demand from the city of Medellin and regions around. Uncontrolled landslides have caused serious forced displacement and death-risk for indigenous and peasant communities along the river. Evidence on the environmental impact shows the dam causing the death of multiple

species. Social movement 'Ríos Vivos' and the 'Victims Affected by Megaprojects' association have denounced state abuses. Instead of being heard, two members were assassinated in 2018, without any explanation by the state. A hidden agenda has been uncovered that the planned flood for the dam will hide mass graves from the 'El Aro Massacre' (1997); therefore, a perfect strategy for impunity.

The 'Odebrecht' corruption scandal, involves a Brazilian construction company that bribed politicians and high-level government actors to get over US \$50 million in infrastructure contracts. Evidence has finally emerged of the illegitimate conduct of elites in public affairs; illegal justice behaviour covering cases; and co-opted legal institutions preventing the truth. Ongoing court cases reveal that Odebrecht financed campaigns for Santos in 2010 and Zuluaga in 2014 (both endorsed by Uribe's party 'Centro Democrático'), and

had a business partnership Colombia's richest man Sarmiento Angulo in the construction of the high road project 'Ruta del Sol II'. Key witnesses have been mysteriously poisoned and evidence keeps being covered up, no case has reached conclusion; things remain as usual.

Other cases include the collapse of 'Chirajara' bridge on the way to Villavicencio (10 workers died), the construction of roads and dams for polluting mining and extractive industries, or the expansion of the Pacific port Buenaventura and other projects on the Caribbean region. They all point at the role of infrastructure as the perfect tool for impunity, social displacement and oppression. We invite social movements and international organisations to remain vigilant in these cases and to denounce systematic abuses from the Colombian state against the affected population.

The Dirty War : 600 Assassinated in 30 months

Many hoped that the agreement between the Colombian government and the country's biggest guerrilla movement, the FARC, signed in Havana in 2016, would bring real peace. These hopes have been dashed however, as it has become ever more clear that only one side of the conflict demobilised: the state's dirty war has continued on an alarming scale. Since the agreement came into effect **there have been around 600 assassinations, mostly of human rights defenders, social and environmental activists.**

Many of the activists are killed in defending their communities and the environment against corporate and multinational mega-projects, such as the Ituango hydro-electric dam (see opposite page). This is the environmentalism of the poor. These communities are on the frontline of the global struggle to defend ecosystems from irrevocable damage, and risk criminalisation, repression and assassination for doing so.

There are major outstanding issues from the Havana Accord. One is that the current President Duque follows the same ultra-right position as former President Alvaro Uribe who opposed dialogue with the FARC, and is refusing to sign off a law that will establish a Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), as a transitional justice mechanism. Former combatants are suspended as to their status, and right-wing death squads are targeting ex-guerrilla fighters and their families.

Another massive unresolved issue is the sharp inequality in land ownership.

A result of seventy years of conflict is that most poor farmers have been driven off their land, which has been seized by ranchers, drug lords and the paramilitary extreme right in projects to reshape the countryside in favour of capitalist export oriented agriculture. The agrarian counter-revolution has been the logic underlying the constant violence against rural communities.

Radiografía de La Desigualdad, a report by Oxfam International, shows that in 1960 units of over 500 hectares accounted for 29% of the land, whereas in 2002 this had reached 47%. The concentration of land ownership accelerated even more in the last decade, **by 2014 these big farms constituted 68% of all owned land, the most unequal distribution in Latin America.**

The government insisted that land redistribution, in effect restoration, was off the Havana agenda, as with all other vital social and economic issues. The predators have been allowed to keep their ill gotten gains. Of the 5 million hectares seized, less than 4% has been returned.



*General Strike 25 April: Bogotá
Police targeted demonstrators*

Operación Dragon: At Last Some Accountability

In an extremely rare, and still just partial, legal success, a Cali court has found three army intelligence officers guilty of illegally seeking to overthrow the elected leadership of a trade union and thwart the careers of its President Alexander López and human rights director Berenice Celeyta, now with the organisation Nomadesc.

The union is SINTRAEMCALI who in the early 2000s fought a tremendous battle to keep the city's water, electricity and telecommunications services in public ownership. As long term CSC supporters will recall, SINTRAEMCALI's strategy of uniting with the community, direct action mobilisation and international connections was an inspiring fight that brought the enterprise under effective workers' control, and was a real challenge to the neoliberal programme of Uribe.

It was at that point that the covert 'Operación Dragon' was set in motion, under military colonel Julian Villate, using all manner of dirty tricks to destabilise the union. Alexander López had already survived three assassination attempts. The operation was uncovered in 2004, but has taken this long. The court success is only partial however as the judge (no jury) decided against the overwhelming weight of evidence that the officers were acting on their own initiative, and had not planned or made any assassination attempts.

Even so, for such military persecution to be held to account at all is highly unusual to the point of unique, and is due to the persistence and courage of the former SINTRAEMCALI team.

Colombians Join XR Protest

The struggle against Cerrejón Coal



Colombian activists joined the Extinction Rebellion (XR) Easter protests in London. On 25 April they spoke about the national strike, the assassination of social leaders, and the destruction of the Cerrejón coal mine.



Trade unionist Luis Norberto Serna called for global unity between environmentalists, workers and social movements to save the planet. At this Marble Arch assembly XR activists spoke about women in Colombia and asked about Colombia's relations with Venezuela.

The Colombia Solidarity Campaign endorses the position of Senator Iván Cepeda, and all progressive opinion, that Colombia should not be used as a forward base, and there should be no US intervention in Venezuela.

For a report in Spanish of an earlier assembly at XR's hot Easter see:
<http://www.colombiainforma.info/extinction-rebellion-un-movimiento-por-la-salvacion-del-planeta/>

The struggle for justice of communities affected by the Cerrejón mine in La Guajira in the far north of Colombia has ramped up in recent months. The vast opencast coal mine is owned by London-listed mining multinationals Anglo American, BHP and Glencore. Indigenous and African-descent agricultural communities have been displaced to make way for the mine and water courses have disappeared.

On 16 January, 50 people from the community of Roche staged a non-violent occupation of part of the mine to demand respect for their rights as people of African descent and to pressure the Cerrejón Coal company into good-faith negotiations over a range of issues.

On 22 February, CAJAR lawyers' collective in Bogota launched a legal action against Cerrejón Coal's environmental licence on behalf of affected communities. The legal action also seeks protective measures to suspend any processes which might grant further permissions to the company. The 'nullification action' aims to establish the mine's responsibility for the humanitarian crisis, the loss of food security and the scarcity of water. These have led to the deaths of 5,000 children and the lack of nutrition of 40,000 more in La Guajira. CAJAR is also trying to ensure that concerns raised by the Constitutional Court about the diversion of the Arroyo Bruno (Bruno Stream) to make way for mining mean that the diversion is reversed.

Representatives of the Solidarity Campaign and allied group Coal Action Network spent much of this year in La Guajira. We raised concerns at the London AGM of Anglo American on 30 April, and hope to have community representatives with us in October for the BHP AGM.

Colombia Solidarity Campaign meets monthly.

Our next meeting is at 6.30pm on Monday 20 May in Central London.

For details, email: info@colombiasolidarity.org.uk

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