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TERRITORY, ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
IN THE PACIFIC COASTAL REGION OF COLUMBIA

"We would like to be very clear that, according to our ancestral rights, we, as peoples and cultures, claim the territory along the Pacific Coast along with its renewable and non-renewable natural resources". (Community Organizations of the Choco, 1992).

From one of the richest biodiversity areas in the world, this piece of the Colombian Pacific Coast in the northwest corner of Latin America, we Embera, Wounaan and Kuna indigenous peoples, together with Afrocolombians, send our greetings to representatives of the national and international community, during this International Year of Native Peoples.

Precisely because of the reflection that this event should produce, we would like you to be aware of the situation that we, as ethnic groups, are suffering. In the name of "development", our existence as Peoples is threatened while the ecosystem that has suffered the same fate over hundreds of years, is being destroyed.

IN THE MIDST OF THE RICHEST BIODIVERSITY, WE ARE SURROUNDED BY DEATH.

From its northern reaches, the Colombian Pacific Coast Area extends south from the Panamanian to the Ecuadorian border. Seventy one thousand continental square kilometers is home to 900.000 people, the majority of whom (95%) belong to indigenous and Afrocolombian ethnic groups.

The basic needs of 80% of this population remain unsatisfied and compared to a national average index of 71 that measures the quality of life, the average here is 50.1. The per capita annual income is \$US 500 (44% of the national average), comparable only to Indonesia, Bolivia and Angola. Public services barely exist in the area and the infant mortality rate reaches levels superior to 150 per 1000. Illiteracy averages 37%, and 60% of the population lives in absolute poverty.

This alarming situation faced by our indigenous and black populations occurs in an area considered to be one of the richest biodiversity concentrations per unit in the world. This is an area where 20-25% of the species are unique to this part of the universe and where there are seven million hectares of tropical rain forest, five million of which have not been touched. This is also an area where, in 1991, 8.8 metric tons of gold were removed and where, each year, 159.000 hectares of woods are deforested.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OR ETHNIC GENOCIDE BESIDE THE SEA OF THE 21ST CENTURY?

As briefly described, this is the setting where an attempt to deny us

our lives and our culture is once again being consummated.

The so-called "Pacific Development Plans" embody a strategy for the construction of all the necessary infrastructure (highways, roads, interoceanic land bridge, seaports) so that power centres have access to the area and can extract its natural resources (hydroelectric, forestry, petrochemical, etc.). Huge amounts of private capital will be used to consolidate the project with no wealth being generated for the region or its peoples, and at the expense of irreparable environmental damage.

Among other public works, the following projects are foreseen: Interoceanic Land Bridge (two seaports in the Uraba Gulf and the Pacific Coast are included); a super highway, coal lines, gas and oil pipelines; the Panamerican Highway from the coffee-growing area (central western part of Colombia) to Nuqui (Pacific coast); industrial cities; the hydroelectrical sites of Boroboro, Calima IV and Murri.....all of these to be accompanied by agro-forestry projects undertaken by the Colombian Forestry Action Plan (CFAP) and biotechnological research by the General Ecology Fund (GEF).

The Bahia Malaga Military Base (slightly north of the city of Buenaventura in the Department of Valle) has already been built as a centre of control, military vigilance, and scientific research. The construction of the gas and oil pipeline between Bahia Malaga and Buga (interior of the Department of Valle, south of the Choco) as well as the Panamerican Highway in the part between Animas (point on the existing highway between Itzmina and Quibdo in Choco) and Nuqui (Pacific Coast) are also underway.

In the same fashion, the Bio-Pacific Project has been initiated with funding from the General Environmental Fund (GEF), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Environmental Program, a project connected with the Forestry Action Plan backed by the World Bank. The objectives of both projects are concerned with biotechnological research, the results of which constitute another pillage for us, in this instance of our communities' ancestral knowledge.

THE IMPACT OF THIS "DEVELOPMENT"

The above-mentioned public works are being planned and implemented without the consent of a people who have been literally trodden on. Among other consequences and impacts, the following results need to be recorded:

- 1) INCREASED POVERTY in the communities as human beings are transformed into mere salaried workers. Because of the comparative disadvantage with imported technologies, the dynamic of subsistence production is being overtaken, and perhaps worse, inhabitants of the area are being displaced by a labour force imported from other regions and other countries.
- 2) ENVIRONMENTAL HOMICIDE, or in other words, the irreparable destruction of existing ecological systems, as public works are implemented without the necessary environmental impact studies. The

result is the destruction of the Colombian Pacific Coast, a virtual lung for the rest of humanity.

- 3) ETHNIC GENOCIDE: the social-cultural dynamic of the indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic groups is interrupted, since the implementation of the plans leads to the displacement of human cultural settlements. They are then forced to associate themselves with the uniformity and massification of capitalist production.

Given this situation, and responding to our goal of "DEFENSE OF TRADITIONAL TERRITORY ON THE PACIFIC COAST", our organizations are struggling to preserve ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic rights. Therefore, given the seriousness of a situation that endangers our lives as peoples and our traditional lands, we have articulated the following requests for justice.

OUR DEMANDS:

1. We demand recognition of, and respect for, our ancestral right to ownership of the traditional territories of the Colombian Pacific Coast.
2. We demand that the right to licenses, permits and concessions for the exploitation of natural resources on the Colombian Pacific Coast be stopped immediately. The same applies to the development of official and private projects until such time we have received an answer to our demand for territorial recognition.
3. We request that the Colombian government comply with existing legislation given that what is happening in practice contravenes this legislation.
4. In the same manner, we demand that the constitutional rights of indigenous ethnic groups be respected, and the same must apply to the ethnic rights of blacks or Afro-Colombian communities.
5. All projects to be developed on our traditional lands must have the approval of the indigenous and black communities and our legally-constituted organizations.
6. From the outset, all projects and public works must be subject to the required environmental, social and cultural impact studies. At the same time, we demand that all projects presently underway that have not complied with this requirement be suspended.
7. The development of the Colombian Pacific Coast must be the result of consultation and dialogue with the ancestral indigenous and black communities, rather than the consequence of an imposition by others. In this sense, we demand that Environmentally Sound Development Plans be formulated, taking our wishes, needs and aspirations as peoples into account.
8. We demand that bio-technological and conservation research respect our acquired rights and our ancestral knowledge. At the same time, we must be the first to benefit from the concrete results in the area of intellectual property rights and patents, as a result of new scientific discoveries.

Project Archive and/or the authors.

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