



COLOMBIA: Brutal Crackdown on Indigenous Protest

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BOGOTA, Oct 16 (IPS) - More than 75 people were injured and at least one was killed in a crackdown on indigenous protests being held in different areas of Colombia.

The protests began Oct. 12, Día de la Raza (Day of the Race -- which marks the anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Americas), in La María, an indigenous reserve in the southwestern province of Cauca.

Demonstrators participating in the National Mobilisation of Indigenous and Popular Resistance, convened by indigenous organisations, blocked the Pan American highway, the main north-south artery in Colombia, a branch of which communicates the country with Ecuador.

To clear the road, the army and police went in with helicopters and armoured vehicles, and opened fire with live ammunition.

"It was terrible, and so unfair. We had no weapons. We only have our ceremonial staffs which symbolise authority. At this moment (midday on Wednesday) they are still shooting, although they have removed us from the Pan American highway," Manuel Rozental, a spokesperson for local indigenous groups, told IPS.

Nevertheless, "the number of protesters is growing. More people are coming down from the mountains to participate in the demonstration, and we estimate there are at least 200,000 indigenous people involved throughout the country," said Rozental.

Active protests are taking place in 16 of Colombia's 32 provinces: La Guajira, Córdoba, Sucre, Atlántico and Chocó, on the northern Caribbean coast; Norte de Santander, Boyacá and Casanare, in the east; Meta, to the south of Bogotá; Risaralda, Caldas, Quindio and Tolima in the centre of the country; Cauca and Huila in the southwest; and Valle del Cauca, in the west.

The indigenous organisations have a list of 12 demands that they want to negotiate in direct talks with rightwing Colombian President Álvaro Uribe.

Referring to the clashes in Cauca, Vice President Francisco Santos said "what is going on there is guerrilla infiltration, and those who are fighting are the Grandchildren of Quintín Lame," an indigenous leader of the last century who fought for recognition of the rights of native communities.

Lame's name was adopted by a group of young indigenous people left landless because the reserves have not been expanded. They use explosives and other violent methods in protests, and are disapproved of by their traditional authorities.

However, the cabildos (local indigenous governing councils) insistently deny any links between the indigenous people and armed groups of any kind.

Colombia has been living through a civil war for nearly half a century, between insurgent groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), far-right paramilitary militias and government troops.

The indigenous people in Cauca are demanding that Uribe put in a personal appearance in the area, because "there are too many precedents of unfulfilled promises. At the world summit of indigenous peoples that was held right there in La María, in 2005, they promised us talks, but what they did was send in more troops, to burn and destroy," said Rozental.

At a plenary session of Congress on Tuesday night, indigenous Senator Jesús Piñacué explained the deep-seated reasons behind the mobilisation, and won support from the International Affairs Commission, and among legislators of the opposition Liberal Party and Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA).

On Wednesday, Piñacué said that just as Uribe has negotiated with drug traffickers and paramilitary forces, he should enter into dialogue with the indigenous people. Agriculture Minister Andrés Felipe Arias called Piñacué a "terrorist." "I hope this struggle that has gone on for so many years, and the specific requests set forth by the present mobilisation, that we have been waiting for with humility and resignation for five years, will be met with solutions. Meanwhile we will keep on struggling, as there is nothing else we can do," Piñacué told IPS.

On Tuesday, the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC) reported the alleged forced disappearance of two people from the protest in La María to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

It also asked the Organisation of American States (OAS) for "urgent intervention" by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, because at the height of the protest the web page belonging to the Association of Indigenous Authorities of Northern Cauca (ACIN) was disabled, and power was cut off at the headquarters of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), from which ONIC's virtual radio station, Dachibedeá, is retransmitted.

More than 30 national and international civil society and human rights organisations said that the indigenous demonstration is part of the actions decided by indigenous groups in 2001, and is "aimed at expressing their rejection of physical and cultural genocide and the various ways in which their rights have been trampled on and violated."

In a communiqué, the social organisations stressed that indigenous territories are coveted for their natural resources, and fought over by the armed groups in the civil war. They are also strategic areas for implementing economic and infrastructure projects, the statement says.

This "violates the autonomy, territorial integrity and collective rights of indigenous peoples, through the violation of sacred areas, the loss of cultures, and the denial of the right of free, prior and informed consent," it says.

In the statement, the social organisations express great concern that the Colombian government has not signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, approved by the U.N. General Assembly on Sept. 13, 2007.

They also allege that the Colombian state is in breach of International Labour Organisation Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and of the recommendations of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples.

Since 2002, when the Uribe administration took office, 1,253 indigenous people have been murdered and at least 54,000 have been expelled from their ancestral lands, according to ONIC.

**With additional reporting by Constanza Vieira in Bogotá. (END/2008)*