



Sister Carmenza Tez, leader of the Camentsa Community in Sibundoy. (Courtesy of Bob Thatch)

ECONOMIC AMBITIONS OVER CARLOS TAMOABIOY THAT BELONGS TO THE CAMENTSA AND INGA PEOPLES WILL ACCELERATE GLOBAL WARMING

*By Sister Carmenza Tez
Alguacil Cabildo Camentsa in Sibundoy, Putumayo*

The indigenous community Camentsa located in the Sibundoy Valley in Putumayo Department (state) in Colombia has five thousand inhabitants. According to several studies there is no other culture similar to ours and this is why we are people from this very place with our own thoughts and language. At present we live as farmers or cattle-raisers. For a variety of reasons our people have extended our presence to the municipalities of Mocoa and Orito in the Lower Putumayo. Unfortunately our culture is on the verge of extinction for many internal and external reasons, which we have experienced

The Humanitarian Crisis in the Eastern Plains of Colombia continued

throughout our history. Right now we confront a very difficult situation due to the economic designs upon our ancestral territory Carlos Tamoabioy, which we share with our brothers the Inga indigenous community.

On March 29, 2010, there was a meeting in the town of San Francisco, Putumayo, which took place without prior notice or an invitation to the Camentsa people in Sibundoy. We went to the meeting and realized that the BID (Inter-American Development Bank), INVIAS (National Institute of Roads) and CORPOAMAZONIA (Colombian Regional Development Office for the Amazon Region) were consulting with 300 campesinos about the enlargement of a forest reserve near the basin of the Mocoa and Blanco Rivers, with the goal of mitigating the environmental impact after the destruction of 90.5 hectares of virgin forest in order to construct the San Francisco–Mocoa road. (ed. This stretch of road is a part of the highway which is planned to run from Belen in Brazil to Tumaco on Colombia's Pacific Coast.) This episode allowed our Camentsa community to realize what plans the Colombian state has for our territory, without consulting with us the indigenous peoples, we who have been the owners of these lands for thousands of years. This ownership is ratified in the will left by Chief Carlos Tamoabioy in the year 1700, which was formalized before a notary public on March 28, 1923 in the city of Pasto.

This moment gave us the opportunity to make clear to the organizers of the meeting that their claims to our territory were made without consulting with us and therefore they were acting against our rights and threatening the life of our Camentsa and Inga peoples by exposing us to death, given the fact that the enlarging of the forest reserve and lands for construction of the road from San Francisco to Mocoa are sacred to

our people, because our life depends upon them. These lands are the source of our water, medicinal plants, the air we breathe and the site of our sacred places, where our traditional shamans carry out their rituals with the spirits of nature to guide our peoples

Later on, on June 26, we carried out a non-violent march, accompanied by the tears of nature itself in the form of a strong rainstorm, as more than six thousand Camentsa and Ingas demanded respect for our territory and the recognition of our existence as ancient peoples. On July 16-17 we marched using the Sachamates path, a sacred place where the Camentsa and Ingas from the Upper and Middle Putumayo got together to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors who exchanged products between the Andean and Amazon regions.

It is precisely in this space where they plan to construct the San Francisco to Mocoa road, an IIRSA project which is part of the multimodal mega-project Tumaco-Belen de Para which will connect the South American continent from the Colombian Pacific coast with Belen de Para in the Atlantic coast of Brazil. (Ed. IIRSA is the Iniciativa para la Integracion de la Infraestructura Regional Suramericana, established as a mechanism for cooperation of 12 Latin American countries to build a common agenda to promote projects of regional integration of transportation, energy and communications infrastructure.)

Later on in August the indigenous communities of the Lower Putumayo carried out a strike protesting the effects of oil companies' activities and the consequences that the construction of the mentioned road will bring. It was then when we created a regional ethnic roundtable for a permanent dialogue and negotiation with the national government, facing as we are these very serious problems for the indigenous communities. A meeting took place last

December 21 in Bogotá, bringing together all the involved institutions in order to call their attention to the magnitude of the environmental, cultural and social effects that construction of the road will bring and the consequences of mining development, given the fact that the construction of the road is to help mining projects. (According to an INGEOMINAS document, by July 2010 there were 90 requests from mining companies for permits to explore in the Upper and Lower Putumayo.)

For us, the Camentsa people, land is Batsana Mama, that is, Our Mother. Nature is the dress that covers and protects her in order for her to give us life with mountains, rivers, and animals. She provides us with everything and in nature's mystery the medicinal plants which provide health to our people. To be so generous and welcoming with outsiders has placed our Mother in danger. At this time the danger is growing, since 90.5 hectares of her fragile and pure dress were taken in the place where the flowages begin which form the upper basin of the Mocoa River and the lower basin of the Blanco River, threatening with extinction the biological diversity which has been preserved there. This is a place that UNESCO declared a special zone for mankind in 1986. We understand it to be the main vertebra of the lungs of the Amazon region. When you touch this vertebra it enters into agony and as a result global warming is accelerated, and its effects will be felt not only in our place but throughout the whole planet.

In this struggle we have also advanced two legal actions. One is a tutela (ed., a legal resource seeking protection from or questioning a governmental measure) filed in September of 2010 and which is at the Constitutional Court awaiting a decision. We also filed a Popular Action in January 2011 in the court in Pasto, which directly seeks

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Action On Colombia is the official newsletter of the Colombia Support Network, a national peace and justice network of groups and individuals working to promote respect for human rights in Colombia and a just relationship between the United States and Colombia through grass-roots activism.

CSN supports a nonviolent, negotiated resolution to the conflict in Colombia.

CSN is the only current project of Wisconsin Interfaith Committee on Latin America

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damage for the environmental destruction of this project. This lawsuit has just begun its required steps, but we are concerned because the Court denied our request for a temporary injunction suspending initiation of work on the road.

Also as a part of this struggle for our territory from January 14 – 16, 2011 the first Convention of Indigenous Students Camentsa and Inga was held to analyze the situation and decide upon the route to follow to maintain the struggle.

I invite all of you who read this to make a worldwide call to protect the indigenous territories, preserving them in their nature and declaring them untouchable, and asking that the designs of economic interests over them be stopped, because these territories are the only ones that can mitigate the consequences of global warming. If these projects are not stopped, the total extermination not only of our indigenous peoples but of all of us who inhabit the planet Earth, will be exterminated. Place calls to the BID (Inter-American Development Bank) and to the Colombian government to stop the mega projects of IIRSA in order to guarantee a drop more of life for following generations.

This process has been started through the conscience of a group of young people Camentsa and Inga, from individual sacrifice and with the collective support of people who are beginning to become aware of the problem. With confidence in God, who is transcendent, yet with the immense help of those who wish to cooperate in this cause given that the economic conditions we live under do not allow us to advance more quickly.

I send a brotherly greeting to the friends of the Colombia Support Network and pray that the One who is all-powerful will send you all the Spirits of Mother Earth to keep giving you wisdom and strength in the construction of a better world.

Faternally,

Carmenza Tez Juagibioy
Camentsa from Cabildo Camentsa
Biya from the municipality of Sibundoy,
Putumayo.

THE UNIVERSAL FLOOD IS REPEATED IN THE MOJANA RIVER BASIN

by William Calderon, Coordinator of Peace initiatives for REDEPAZ in Southern Bolivar

Translated by John I. Laun, a CSN volunteer translator

Tiquisio is one of 28 municipalities in the River Basin of La Mojana (where the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers meet). As occurs every year in the rainy period, it is once again experiencing the overflowing of rivers, marshes and ponds. But this year it has suffered the most catastrophic, devastating flooding in all the history of the region. For that reason, I am writing not just of our needs in Tiquisio, but rather of the scourge which lashes the whole Mojana region and affects nearly 400,000 of our brothers and sisters.

There are several structural factors which cause the flooding in the region

each year. It is a cyclical tragedy bringing suffering to nearly half a million people in the Mojana during the rainy periods (April-May and October-November). The rains always lead to flooding of some 20 municipalities containing nearly 500,000 hectares of fertile lands, which sinks the “amphibious culture” (a name given by the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda to the people of La Mojana) into economic poverty.

La Mojana has been one of the places most affected by the internal armed conflict in Colombia in the last 50 years, especially from the bloody actions of the paramilitaries. The involvement of governors, members of Congress, political leaders, cattlemen and large landowners in the so-called “para-politica”, combined with the neglect of the state toward the Mojana people, has resulted in immense socioeconomic

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A school in Tiquisio. (All Tiquisio pictures are courtesy of William Calderon)



disequilibrium, which has made the region one of the very poorest in Colombia.

The abandonment of the pre-Colombian practices of a harmonic relation between humans and mother earth could be a central, fundamental cause giving rise to this problem. The dynamics of armed conflict and social conflict converted La Mojana into an expelling-receiving territory of a population stimulated by the growing of crops used for illicit purposes, geo-strategic corridors of armed confrontation, and drug-trafficking, as well as of artisan-scale gold mining, and expansion of bio-fuels such as palm oil which today have made the Mojana River Basin into one of the zones of increasing rural poverty and one exposed to critical cyclical humanitarian emergencies.

In addition, the alliance between the politicians of the region and paramilitaries today has the last three Governors of the Departments of Bolivar, Sucre and Cordoba and 90%

of the members of Congress of the previous decade in prison or convicted. This has generated permanent violence, while the indices of poverty, misery and unemployment grow considerably. Meanwhile, the scarce state efforts carried out by the national government, principally with deployment of military units to the territory beginning with the policy of Democratic Security, are not adequate.

The Model of Capitalist Development: The excessive overflowing of the armed conflict made possible the support of corruption in the public administration of the Departments and municipalities of the Mojana region. In addition, this conjunction of harmful actors and situations permitted the application of a latifundia model which fenced in hundreds of marshes (wetlands) and ponds for development of extensive cattle-raising and monoculture crops, systematically breaking the aquatic eco-system of La Mojana.

The Constituent Processes:

This situation requires the application

of new forms of planning and intervention in the zone, beginning with synergies between social and community actors on the local, Departmental and regional levels and cooperation with them on the national and international levels. Cooperating organizations which interact in the region, such as the National Network of Citizen Initiatives for Peace and Against War (“Redepaz”), have promoted a broad debate among all sectors, which includes the people of La Mojana and their authorities.

To begin with, Redepaz gathered together a large number of scientific, social, cultural and environmental studies; governmental documents; literature; and newspaper articles in order to become fully conversant with the La Mojana River Basin. More

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Travel on flooded lands

JUDY LEURQUIN

recently, a process is underway to approach and come to an agreement with public sector institutions, organizations and associations of the private, social and communitarian sectors which play a role in the zone. The floods of 2010 in La Mojana have led the Colombian government to create an Office of Management of Re-establishment and Normalization.

To avoid inadequate (infrastructure) works and to achieve participative and democratic “normalization”, a matching of science, the Colombian state, local and regional authorities, and the civil and communitarian society of La Mojana would have merit. This development would gather together the numerous previous studies of the zone, “popular knowledge”, and expertise to come to an agreement concerning definitive solutions to the periodic scourge of floods.

After this environmental, social and economic catastrophe, one can say that poverty was ended in the zone; now there is only utter economic misery. But not everything is lost. The population is organizing itself, as in Tiquisio through the Citizen Process for Tiquisio (Proceso Ciudadano por Tiquisio). This Process is the first Municipal Constituent Assembly, and it motivated neighboring municipalities such as Guaranda, Achi, Pinillos, Santacruz de Mompoz and Magangue to establish new constituent assemblies. These can provide a decisive voice in the resolution of problems, so they will never again have “100 years of solitude.”

A few weeks ago a long-time supporter of CSN’s activities in Madison, Judy Leurquin, passed away after a long battle with cancer. Judy was a tireless opponent of military training for Latin American soldiers at the School of the Americas (SOA, now WHINSEC) at Fort Benning in Georgia. She and her long-time companion and significant other Russ Attoe went to Fort Benning and interviewed teachers and students at the SOA, documenting the way in which instruction is carried out and the prejudicial effects of this training upon Latin American officers, who often return to their home countries and order massacres of civilians. Years ago, Judy went to El Salvador to march with villagers opposed to the repressive Salvadorian government of that time. And she always had time for our Colombian concerns. She and Russ would bring their cameras and film our CSN public programs, then see that they were shown on the local public access TV station—all at no cost to us and without us even asking them to do so.

We will miss very much Judy and her constant support. We send our sincere sympathies to Russ and to Judy’s children and their families.

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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Senator Feingold: Oh how we miss you!

By Jack I. Laun

Not long after Russ Feingold was elected to the United States Senate for his first term, several members of our Colombia Support Network Board went to meet him at his office, accompanied by future Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin and future Wisconsin State Representative Mark Pocan, at the time both members of the Dane County Board. Senator Feingold listened carefully to our concerns about the dramatic situation in our sister community of Apartado, even though he had no particular reason to be interested in Colombia, South America. Ever since that first meeting, Russ showed interest in our organization and supported our efforts to advance human rights in Colombia. He connected us to his staff members who assisted him in his role as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and made them available to us to listen to our concerns. And no matter how busy he was with the legislative process in Washington, he made time for us. He even invited us to meet with him personally in his local office on a Saturday morning, taking time to meet with us even as his signature McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill was being considered by Congress, to discuss the situation in Colombia and to hear from us what we felt our government should do to support the grass-roots community organizations which formed our CSN sister communities. He worried with us about the damage the militaristic focus of U.S. Government aid was causing to the Colombian people, and took very seriously our complaints about the harm

that the coca crop spraying campaign causes drenching peasants' fields with high-strength Roundup Ultra herbicide which kills their staple food crops, sickens their animals and causes rashes in their children.

But Russ Feingold was much more than a sympathetic voice to CSN in the U. S. Senate. He was (and of course is) an honest, straightforward champion of the common man who speaks his mind, even where political expedience would suggest not doing so. His vote in the Senate against the Patriot Act, the only Senator to vote against this severely flawed legislation which undermined many of our basic civil liberties, was an unparalleled act of political courage. His stand against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and his efforts to end U. S. military involvement in these conflicts, was emphatically right, even though his colleagues in Congress paid little attention to his efforts.

Russ Feingold always understood that he represented the people of Wisconsin. He held listening sessions each year in all 72 of Wisconsin's counties, something no other politician we know of has tried. And at those sessions he listened carefully to the complaints and observations of those who attended, usually large in number. He eschewed campaign contributions from interest groups and refused to be co-opted by special interests or their lobbyists. (His successor in the Senate, Ron Johnson, on the other hand, hired a lobbyist as the chief of staff in his Washington office.)

A Rhodes Scholar, Russ brought an active intelligence to every problem and every issue. We in Wisconsin will greatly miss this. While Russ worked to protect the environment by controlling

carbon emissions, his successor Ron Johnson foolishly doubts the reality of human contribution to global warming, attributing environmental changes to sunspot activity.

CSN members all across our country, and numerous friends of CSN in Colombia have asked us how such an outstanding statesman could have been turned out of office by the voters of Wisconsin. Russ undoubtedly suffered from the anti-Democrat sentiments throughout this country, stoked by the Rush Limbaughs and Glenn Becks in the right-wing media. And he believed in the positive points of the health care reform legislation and defended his vote in favor of it even when popular sentiment, based upon ignorance of the effects of the law, opposed the legislation. He never took the route of political expediency, even if it meant he might not be re-elected to the Senate.

We are pleased that Senator Feingold has agreed to teach at Marquette University Law School, where he can demonstrate to students what it means to be an honorable man and impart his extensive knowledge and understanding of government to future generations. We at CSN wish him success in this new endeavor. But we fervently hope he will return to government, where we so greatly need him. We encourage you to write to Russ at the address shown below to tell him what he has meant to you and to our efforts on behalf of peace and justice.

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Gold, Water and Planet Earth

[Note from the Editor: our next newsletter will more in depth the subject of Santurban]

By Cecilia Zarate-Laun*

What is the limit to mining gold on this planet? A mining project in Colombia shows how the cost may be too high if it involves the destruction of mountain habitats from which drinking water is derived. Water is a precious liquid that is becoming scarce. Gold is not indispensable for life, but water is.

The Andes Mountains in South America are the location of the largest concentration of water-producing highlands (paramos) on the planet. Paramos are unique ecosystems and have volcanic soil that contains aluminum and organic material coming from herbs and bushes. When combined with the aluminum in the soil, the organic material forms particles which are resistant to decomposition and are able to retain water for long periods, releasing it slowly and continuously.

Where does the water come from? The bushes and herbs of the paramos transform the ever-present fog into liquid water. This is why the Andean paramos are considered natural “factories” of drinking water. They also have a kind of marshes called “turberas”, which behave like sponges and regulate water in small or large quantities according to the time of the year. Due to the very nature of their soil, the paramos of the Andes store carbon from the atmosphere, helping to control global warming. These

mountains might actually offer an answer to the problems of global warming and scarcity of water.

Let’s consider Santurban paramo. Located in the eastern range of the Colombian Andes, Santurban is an ecosystem which displays high bio-diversity. It is at the headwater of many rivers and streams, in addition to 85 small lakes and ponds which sustain the agriculture and cattle-raising of the lands below. The Santurban paramo provides water for the cities of Bucaramanga and Cucuta as well as 20 small towns. It features 457 species of plants, among them the striking frailejon, ferns, orchids, mosses, lichens and the Quercus Humboldtii oak; 201 species of birds which are endemic to Santurban, as well as mammals, amphibians, lizards and frogs.

The Canadian multinational Greystar requested permission to search for and mine gold and silver in Santurban. In colonial times, the Spanish Crown obtained gold in the region through small-scale tunneling. The technology at that time was very different from the technology proposed by Greystar, which wants to excavate more than 2,700 acres and construct 2 waste piles and a dump at an altitude of 8,500 to 13,450 feet. The soil will be removed with explosives. A hole of 656 feet will be made and 1.075 billion tons of rock will be removed, of which 300 million will go to the leaching piles to be located near the Angostura and Paez Rivers. The concentration of sodium cyanide in the leaching piles would be 500 mg per liter.

The volume of sodium cyanide used in each pile would be 4,500 to 5,000 cubic meters per hour. Its cycle would be 60 days long and the time of leaching would be 10 years. Greystar plans to use 250,000 liters of water per hour, in order to extract 11.5 million ounces of gold and 61 million ounces of silver. When Greystar leaves, it will leave behind the hole and the desert by which to be remembered.

What will happen to the 85 ponds and Santurban’s biodiversity? How about the rivers, whose headwaters are in the mining zone? What will happen to the rivers that provide drinking water to Bucaramanga, a city of one million people? The cyanide accumulated in the dump will degrade and go into the air, a contamination risk that would cause acid rain in these water-producing mountains. And because so much water will be used in the mine, groundwater currents will be weakened. Therefore, the paramo’s capacity to produce water will diminish when the water-capturing soils are removed.

Furthermore, this is an area of frequent earthquakes. What happens if the piles with cyanided water break and cyanide infiltrates the rivers that come from the mountain?

The Colombian Constitution clearly provides that water resources for human consumption will have priority above any other use. It is time for the Colombian government to stop issuing mining permits for high mountains. It should abandon its insanity of putting the incredible biodiversity of the country at risk and at the service of the highest bidder. It is time to start thinking that water is more valuable than gold and to declare Santurban a national park. The people of Colombia deserve respect and development for the welfare of all, not projects serving the greed of foreign investors.

The Colombian government’s responsibility is not only with Colombia but with the whole planet. Colombian President Santos can seek out other ways for development which do not involve the environmental degradation and risks which mining creates. Is there no gold in Canada? Why not seek it there?

*Program Director of the Colombia Support Network in Madison, Wisconsin





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