



Campesinos in Putumayo go about their daily lives along the Guamez River. This region has seen horrendous human rights abuses and land confiscation on an unparalleled scale. Is it too much to ask for a simple existence?

Until the Sun no longer shines

by Ancizar Gutierrez

A LETTER FROM THE EMBERA—CHAMI TO THEIR SISTER COMMUNITY, THE KANSAS CITY CHAPTER OF THE COLOMBIA SUPPORT NETWORK

The process of the Plan of Life of the Embera-Chami people of the Putumayo in Colombia springs from the feelings and the thoughts of the community of the municipality of La Hormiga in southern Colombia, very near the frontier with the neighboring country of Ecuador. It arises from the necessity of the three settlements of the Embera-Chami people, since the Colombian state has placed us in a process which would deny us our lands and deliver them to others who are not even acquainted with them nor are owners of the riches which exist in them.

The ideology and thought of our elders is that we should not let them remove an arm or our mother because the land is our means of remembrance of our ancestors who have left these lands to us. Therefore we will be resistant and we will continue to struggle until “jirufota wuar” which means that the possession of these lands is the very law of origin of our Embera people.

Until the Sun no longer shines continued

Since 1977 we have been resisting in a series of conflicts, but we have also been firm and confident in accord with our laws and Article 7 of the Colombian National Constitution, where the state

They have fumigated our different subsistence food crops, among them plantains, corn, cassava, rice, and chiro. These are the crops which sustain our daily life. We do not understand what the government proposes to do, but we wish to make clear that we will not abandon our land come what may.

recognizes the ethnic diversity of the indigenous people. Our thought is that we will leave tracks which can not be erased for our descendants, remembering the past and taking into account the present which we are leaving.

Elder Emiliano Monogamia has provided the following message: "We wish you to help us and to provide us your great support in opening broad vistas as we have been working hard in our culture to strengthen unity, development and autonomy. Through our conversation with you we want you to see how we are living marginalized by the Colombian state. For the Colombian state we have been dead for many years, and for that reason we ask that you make this known in the United States. We want the two members of our community who are in the process of being trained as leaders to fight for us, which would be the only inheritance which would be left us. I as the elder know that my life is running out little by little and I would like to see them prepared. Then I would go happily to be with Karagabi, my father, Creator of the Heavens".

The fumigation process affects not only the coca, but we the human beings who live in this country. When confrontations occur, many peasants abandon their lands, but we the indigenous

communities remain and resist all of the conflicts. The reservations of Argelia, Italia and the Cabildo Las Palmeras are also affected by the conflicts, and this year began very differently from last year because they have fumigated our food crops, such as plantains, corn, cassava, rice, chiro, etc. These are our daily subsistence foods. We do not understand what the government is proposing to do, but one thing is very clear for us: we will not abandon our territory come what may. We are ready to give our lives for our land and we will keep resisting until the sun no longer shines. We want this to be publicized nationally and internationally, because this is not just a cultural attachment to the land, as the Colombian government wrongly thinks, but our right and our inheritance.

If we had cameras we would send you photographs, but we are sorry we do not

have them. However, this is not important because you are monitoring everything which happens in our country.

In advance we wish to thank you.

ANCIZAR GUTIERREZ

MARCH 25 Email from Ancizar

On March 25 CSN received the following email update from Ancizar: As a consequence of the fumigation, we the Embera communities are suffering an epidemic of fever and the loss of our food crops. Our children are those who are most affected by this. Our animals suffer from the fumigation and our crops have been lost. These events plus the armed confrontations nearby are designed to get us to abandon our lands. But, thanks to the guidance provided by our elders, we are resisting. At this moment we are beginning to plant rice for subsistence, but unfortunately we do not have a rice mill. We would be grateful if instead of buying glyphosate the US Government would provide us with a rice mill.

Ancizar Gutierrez This letter was written by Ancizar Gutierrez, one of the young leaders of the Embera-Chami who can read and write in Spanish and who translated from Embera to Spanish the message from Elder Emiliano Monogamia. The translation to English has been made by John Laun.

Meeting between the Kansas City chapter representatives and leaders of the Embera Chamies in El Tigre.



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 grassroots 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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December 2007 Colombia Delegation

Personal Reflections



The unpaved road to El Tigre built next to an oil pipeline.

by *Jonne Long*

I approached this delegation experience with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation. Colombia can be a very dangerous place. Its people have been caught up for over 40 years in brutal internal conflict, perpetuated by complex layers of political power struggles, and resulting in thousands of civilian deaths. Over 3 million Colombians, a majority of them women and children, have been internally displaced and are living in desperate circumstances.

I am as much dismayed and, yes, frightened, by the heavy toll drug use is taking in the US as anyone else—maybe more so. One of my volunteer activities is visiting men in the US Penitentiary at Leavenworth KS. The vast majority of the men I see are there because of illegal drug dealing. I see how devastating the drug-based economy/culture is to them, their families, and their neighborhoods.

So why wouldn't I be a gung-ho supporter of the U.S. government's Plan

Colombia "war on drugs"? Why did I even think about chancing a trip to Putumayo, one of the hotbeds of coca production in Colombia? After all, there is no shortage of peace and justice issues to tackle here in the U.S.

Information about this particular struggle was placed squarely before me when I was study leader for my local church Christian Women's Fellowship group a few years ago and the study topic was Colombia. I learned of the suffering of millions of poor, politically voiceless Colombians—predominately women and children. I was moved by their plight and upset when I learned that much of this suffering was being aided and abetted by US government support for the conflict. My tax dollars were being used to help oppress the citizens of another country under the guise of a "war on drugs."

Seeking others who felt the same, I found Kansas City's Colombia Support Network group, and began attending their meetings. They were making plans to

become a full-fledged CSN chapter by taking the giant step of traveling to Colombia and being matched with a sister community there.

The US has provided billions in military aid to Colombia (well over \$5 billion since 2000) to support Plan Colombia's brutal measures that disregard human rights and dismiss human suffering. Reports indicate the amount of coca being grown in Colombia has not decreased after several years of Plan Colombia. It is clear the current program of fumigation and attempted military enforcement is simply not meeting the goal of thwarting the source. It is, however, succeeding in increasing the profits of Monsanto (who supplies the deadly chemicals used for fumigation) and the US contractors who supply airplanes, helicopters, military weapons, ammunition, and personnel (pilots and military trainers). Millions of poor Colombians continue to suffer because of this misguided initiative. I simply had to do something besides just read about it.

Our point of entry into Putumayo was the tiny airport at Puerto Asis, near the Equator. Although I was prepared mentally for the heat and less than comfortable traveling conditions we would experience in Putumayo, I was not quite prepared for the oppressive military presence we found there. We were not permitted to leave the small, unfurnished terminal until we had individually passed before a soldier who recorded our passport information and asked the reason for our presence there. Townspeople were peering in at us through the barred door and windows.

I soon came to learn that the Bishop of the Diocese of Putumayo, behind the scenes, was playing a critical role in seeing to the logistical and safety considerations

of our visit. The priest of El Tigre Parish, where our visit was to take place, had been shot four days prior to our arrival while traveling the road we had planned to use to reach the Embera-Chami communities. This event caused a hasty rearrangement of our schedule and meeting plans. The Bishop had immediately dispatched a church administrator from his own office, Deacon Julio, to El Tigre to take things in hand, both for the members of the parish and for our visit. It was determined that our delegation would NOT travel all the way to the Embera-Chami communities, but would stay in the church dormitory in El Tigre instead. The Embera-Chami would travel to El Tigre to meet with us, which required last-minute transportation and sleeping arrangements for over 60 people. Julio handled it all with grace and good humor, and the Bishop visited in person on our first meeting day to greet and pray for our assembled group.

The journey from Puerto Asis to El Tigre involved nearly 3 hours of rough dusty hilly winding pipeline roads with 12 of us (four KC-CSN delegates, our CSN guide Cecilia, Fr. Campo Elias—our local



Bob Thatch and Jonne Long from Kansas City with Luis, an Embera leader.

host, Ishmael—a young man representing the Embera who came to Puerto Asis to greet us, Julio, two drivers, and a couple of others) squeezed into a small Toyota king-cab type pickup fitted with canopy and bench seats in the bed. Our luggage was piled precariously on top, first collecting dust, and later soaked as we drove through a rainstorm. But the experience riding in the little pickup provided transition/adjustment time for what was to come.

The two bare-chested Embera-Chami “alguaciles” (peacekeepers) in traditional face paint and headdresses who met us with decorated crossed wooden spears in El Tigre were more than just a welcome sight after our rough trip. In two short days, they became our brothers. Their faces were stern and unemotional while on duty—they and several other alguaciles took turns guarding us day and night while we were in El Tigre. Inside, we were welcomed with hand/arm shakes, embraces and cheek kisses from their wives and children.

The Embera are short of stature and slight of build, but large in heart, principle, determination, and vision. Somehow the barriers of our different languages, cultures, traditions, environments, and life experiences were overcome with determination to forge a friendship built on common ground.

Three languages were in play: the traditional Embera language, Spanish, and English. The majority of Embera are bilingual (traditional and Spanish), but a few speak only their traditional language. Most of the older people are illiterate, however several of the young men are able to read and write at some level. Among the rest of us, a few speak

only Spanish, a few are to some degree bilingual in Spanish and English, and I alone speak only English. Sometimes during the formal meetings, two translations were required: traditional to Spanish to English, or English to Spanish to traditional. Although it was exciting to

Profound sadness that human beings can be so brutal, so callous, so unconcerned about the lives and rights of fellow human beings. Feeling personally and collectively implicated in cause of the pain and suffering and guilty for not doing more to “fix it.”

witness this wonderful cultural mix, the translation requirements also slowed the communication process considerably so that presentations and conversation took twice as long. I was personally completely dependent on others to give English meaning to the proceedings, and I was constantly grateful to Cecilia and Maria, who were my language lifelines.

Highlights:

- Making direct contact with indigenous people facing great survival challenges, yet committed to preserving their nonviolent heritage and using it as the foundation for building their future.
- Observing the young Embera men taking seriously leadership roles in shaping and presenting the components of the history and vision of each community, and deferring respectfully to the elders during the process.
- Feeling honored that so many of the Embera people would expend great effort to come to El Tigre for two days to reach out to us, to protect us, to perform their cultural music and dance for us, and to invite us into their future.

Concerns:

- Seeing the real live impact of the US and Colombian “war on drugs” on the lives of human beings, for example, seeing

the effects of malnutrition among the Embera, especially children and nursing mothers, because their legitimate food crops have been destroyed by the coca fumigation program.

- Being given deferential treatment for meals and accommodations—not knowing how to insist on eating with the Embera instead of being served separately. Not being able to express thoughts and emotions directly in language the Embera could understand.
- Meeting face to face with a group of internally displaced people near Mocoa and hearing their personal accounts of losing family members to violence, fleeing for their lives, and being forced to live on the edge with no help from the government—giving flesh and blood and raw emotion to the stories I have read about. Not knowing how to help.
- Profound sadness that human beings can be so brutal, so callous, so unconcerned about the lives and rights of fellow human beings. Feeling personally and collectively implicated in cause of the pain and suffering and guilty for not doing more to “fix it.”

Reasons for Hope:

- Many selfless Colombians do care about the marginalized and voiceless among them and are working tirelessly to resist fear, organize for human rights, identify bodies found in mass graves, and bring to justice perpetrators of brutal crimes.
- A viable opposition political party is growing in strength in Colombia.
- The Diocese of Putumayo is caring for and supporting the indigenous and



CSN guests enjoying a traditional Embera dance.

marginalized people in Putumayo through its Office of Pastoral Social and the Youth Group in El Tigre Parish.

- Colombia Support Network is providing a reasoned, methodical, and effective framework for addressing the systemic problems that marginalize millions of people in Colombia.

**Kansas City Chapter Delegation
Colombia Support Network
Putumayo, Colombia, South America**

Delegation members Bob Thatch, Dave Davis, Maria Pelto, Jonne Long, and Ann Suellentrop are available to report and discuss their findings

Itinerary Dec. 2 – 11, 2007: Bogota, Puerto Asis, El Tigre, and Mocoa

The delegation visited an indigenous Embera-Chamies community in the El Tigre area for the purpose of establishing a

working sister community relationship based on mutual respect and avoiding a patronizing or charitable stance. A key characteristic of this community is their nonviolent resistance in contrast to the guerrilla movements, which have chosen to engage in violent resistance. In spite of the area’s 42-year history

of bloody and brutal conflict, the Embera-Chamies have had the courage to organize themselves around principles of nonviolence.

CSN seeks to give political support to local Colombian community political processes pursuing the same goals: a negotiated solution to the conflict and strengthening civilian society. This work contrasts with efforts by others to strengthen armed groups (the US government supports the army and supplies mainly military equipment thus increasing the conflict.)

The Diocese of Putumayo, through its Pastoral Social office, and the parish of El Tigre served as local hosts during the first half of the trip. The second half was based in a Bogota hotel. In Bogota we met with the Ministry of the Interior/ Justice, the Ministry of Defense (Vice Minister for Human Rights), the American Embassy, and several local NGOs.

Colombian Host: Father Campo Elias De La Cruz, Roman Catholic priest

Planner, Tour Leader & Translator: Cecilia Zarate-Laun, National Program Director, Colombia Support Network

*To arrange a presentation, contact
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or 816-333-3855 (evening)
or Jonne Long 816-741-9293*



Main Street, El Tigre

Colombia's Flower Industry

by Jonne Long

On December 8, 2008 we met in Bogota with Aura Elizabeth Rodrigues, the Executive Director of CACTUS Cooperative, an NGO, which advocates for the rights and welfare of flower industry workers. We learned there are 111,000 flower industry workers, 65% of whom are women. Only 3% of these workers are unionized. Eighty percent of Colombian flower exports go to the United States. February 14 is the biggest day of the year for this industry.

Flower production in Colombia has brought a number of problems. The flowers use large volumes of water, with a resultant reduction of Bogota – area aquifers. Flower workers suffer from large amounts of chemicals inside the green houses, and many of them are not provided proper protective gear. Nor do the owners follow the law requiring a 24-hour wait after applying the chemicals before workers may return to the green houses where the flowers are grown. And when workers suffer from repetitive movements, such as cutting flowers or pulling weeds all day long, growers refuse to recognize these as work-related conditions. Workers who miss work to seek medical help run the risk of being fired.

The flower companies pay the workers less than the minimum wage, \$250 dollars per month with women receiving even less, only about \$150 dollars per month. Workers are often asked to work long hours without extra pay for overtime, receiving instead just compensatory time off in slack times. An increasing number of intermediary contractors are being used, with shorter contracts (one to three months) and more workers being hired as temporary workers year-round. Companies also bring in inexperienced applicants as “trainees” and then fire them after a few weeks for allegedly not meeting the job requirements—allowing the companies to obtain free labor. Pregnant women are not supposed to work in the greenhouses because of the exposure to toxic chemicals, but the flower company owners just have the women say they are not pregnant and hire them anyway—in fact nine companies have even been reported to have demanded that women workers have their tubes tied!

Worker's cooperatives such as Cactus are a relatively new way of advocating for women's rights. Cactus has 8,000 members. While co-ops were formed to produce and sell to flower companies, now company owners have stopped providing benefits and rely on the co-ops to provide benefits. Some companies have even formed non-profit cooperatives, which they control and which can pay minimum wages and are exempt from income tax.

Colombia's flower industry does not provide the welfare for



Empty chairs stretching more than 70 blocks along Bogota's Carrera Septima, in remembrance of victims of paramilitary violence

workers it claims to. It is not an example of the success of “Free Trade”. Since women working in the flower industry are responsible for both production and taking care of children, a generation of children is growing up without adequate parental care and women are denied the opportunity to participate in community life. Cactus is seeking to change this by celebrating “International Flower Workers’ Day” each February 14, making people all over the world aware of the Colombian flower industry’s exploitation of women and helping workers to organize and to work effectively for protective laws and practices in the Colombian flower industry. Cactus does not suggest boycotting Colombian flowers, but rather encourages consumers to make their flower purchases responsible acts by demanding that producers give their workers decent working conditions.

CSN proposes to organize support for Cactus’ “International Flower Workers’ Day” for February 14, 2009.

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The Reality of being displaced in Colombia

By Bob Thatch

The Kansas City delegation visited a community of displaced persons on the outskirts of Mocoa, the capital of Putumayo. The residents brought out red plastic patio chairs, and we sat in a circle to listen to their stories.

It was pretty grim. They fled their homes because of either violence or the fumigation of their crops. They have no money and few opportunities for employment. In many cases, they reported that a husband or brother had been killed, and the survivors were told that they would also be killed if they remained living in their former homes.

The “typical” displaced family is a woman with children. In the Mocoa displaced community there are 91 families—a total of 600 displaced persons—who have settled in a valley just down a short, steep gravel road from the main highway into town. They lived there under makeshift tents made of plastic sheets for a while, but now have rough, unpainted shacks for houses.

We promised them we would relay their stories, and I trust they will forgive misspelled names. The President of the Association was a man named Nave Nario,

Shacks of displaced persons in the south of Bogota

who said “We know the U.S. invests a lot in the war here, but they do not spend money on productive projects, only on fumigation. We are completely abandoned.”

Elivardo Charra said, “We are peasants. We did not want to participate with either the FARC or the paramilitaries. We were threatened by both to either join them or leave. There is more security here, but from Mocoa on down [to lower Putumayo] there is no security.” He added, “most of us have been here five years, on someone else’s land.”

Jose Luis Muñoz said he had been displaced by violence and threats from paramilitaries. He said, “Where I lived the police and paramilitaries work together, and the military does not stop them. I have been here four years. My brother was killed by the paramilitaries, but I am afraid to report it. If I would denounce them in court, in one or two days I would be dead.”

An older man said “I heard you were talking about fumigation. It’s fine if they want to fumigate coca, but they fumigate everything, even grazing areas for cattle. Our food was fumigated—we have pictures to prove it! I would have brought the pictures if I had known.”

Hilda Lopez said her son had been killed, and Berta Castillo, from nearby Villa Garzón,

said two of her sons were killed. She apologized as she started to cry, and said she could not say any more.

Floromundo Cartucio said he had lived in a town called Arizona, in the Municipality of Puerto Caicedo. The guerillas came to his house and said they wanted his sons to join them, so the next day his family fled the area.

Umberto Bravo said his family was in an area that saw violence from the FARC, the paramilitaries and the Colombian Army. They managed to go back and forth for a while, but then their land was fumigated, and they had to leave.

As our session ended, we came back around to the President of the Association, who added, “There is a lot of money being spent on fumigation. It would be better to spend the money teaching persons not to use drugs.”

We went back to Mocoa, where we spoke with a woman named Mireya, the Secretary of the Pastoral Social Office of the diocese. We learned that they supply some support for the displaced community, but they are being overwhelmed by the number of persons needing help, since there are many thousands of displaced persons in Putumayo, and a total of around four million in Colombia. The government passed some laws designed to provide assistance for them, but no one enforces those provisions.

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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