

OPEN LETTER FROM THE COLOMBIAN SOUTH PACIFIC TO ALL COLOMBIANS AS WELL AS THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

To:

President Barack Obama

Vice President Joseph Biden

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee

The Congressional Black Caucus

Edward Jurith, Acting Director of the Office of National Drug Control

Hugh Grant, CEO of the Monsanto Corporation

(Translated by Rolf and Anne Schoeneborn, CSN volunteer translators)

We, the undersigned representatives and members of the following Community Councils¹: Unión del Río Chagui, el Recuerdo de Nuestros Ancestros del Río Mejicano, and Unión del Río Rosario, are Afro-Colombians who live in the South Pacific coastal province of Nariño and whose collective property rights are recognized by the Colombian Constitution and Law 70, passed in 1993, Law 21, passed in 1991, and Decree 1745 of 1995. We direct this letter to the institutions of the Colombian Government as well as Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, environmental, peasant, and student organizations, labor unions, embassy representatives in Colombia, national and international human rights organizations, aid agencies, the people of the United States, the United Nations Organizations, the European Union, and the general public. We hereby state and propose the following:

1. For the last fifteen years our communities have suffered under the full weight of the consequences resulting from the presence of illicit crops in our collective territories, namely: loss of our values and culture, loss of our traditional productive base, environmental degradation, the weakening of our organizational structures, and the increased violence resulting from the intrusion of different armed groups (paramilitaries, drug traffickers, common criminals, and the Colombian military), which have turned our land of peace into a land of war. In the last six months, the municipality of Tumaco has seen one of the highest murder rates in the country. More deaths occurred in Tumaco than during the recent Gaza war between Israel and Palestine and during this same period of the war in Afghanistan.
2. The Community Councils have been cognizant of this problem since 2002 and, through the development of our ‘Planes de Vida’², we have established our own ways of voluntarily eradicating illicit crops. We realized that indiscriminate aerial

¹ A number of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities on the Pacific coast have been granted the right to govern autonomously through local governments called Community Councils.

² One way rural communities in Colombia are non-violently confronting the threats to their way of life is by creating “planes de vida.” A “plan de vida” is a long-term alternative development plan that establishes the way a community or an indigenous group conceives of its future. All the members of a particular group participate in creating the plan, which then serves as a navigational map summarizing how the group plans to live in order to preserve its culture and also how it plans to address issues such as the environment, territory, government, health, education, gender and family, water, and plumbing.

fumigation affects licit and illicit crops as well as fauna, forests and water sources. Fumigation has deepened the crisis afflicting our communities and only serves to increase the volume of illicit crops being cultivated.

3. More than 100 years of injustice and inequality have resulted in increased poverty in our communities and the planting of illicit crops in our territories. We now face a social and economic problem that demands attention. We believe that illicit crops are not being grown, processed and sold simply because they “are a means of financing terrorism,” but rather that behind these phenomena is a more profound social and economic problem that cannot be solved using armed might, extrajudicial measures or aerial fumigations.
4. The three community councils initiated a project of alternative development in collaboration with USAID/Colombia (through ARD Inc.), the governmental organization ‘Acción Social de la Presidencia de la República,’ and the ‘United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’ (UNODC). Each of the collaborating parties contributed.
5. For this project to be viable, productive zones free of illicit crops and verified as such by UNODC had to be designated, grouping together peasant farmers committed to this new strategy.
6. After two years of planning and work with our communities, we have cleared illicit crops from 5,550 hectares of land to be used for agroforestry, and from 16,333 hectares to be reforested. To achieve this, 500 hectares of illicit coca crop had to be voluntarily eradicated. The method we used was not only more effective, but also much less destructive, than that used by the government for the last seven years, namely fumigating our land using glyphosate.
7. This community initiative and the productive process involved in implementing an alternative development plan has led the Community Councils to gain recognition and to strengthen their organizational structures. We have succeeded in establishing and/or improving 1,200 hectares of cacao, 750 hectares of coconuts and implementing two systems of sustainable logging and forest conservation.
8. The process was 70% complete, and included 700 Community Council families who had completed the transition from an economy based on illicit crops to one based on licit crops.
9. Despite our effort and progress:
 - We do not understand why the government, which supports such initiatives, decided to fumigate our new crops despite the fact that they had been checked and verified by the United Nations. It is the Colombian Government that formally agreed that the UNODC is the party responsible for verifying the presence of illicit crops in Colombia.

- We do not understand why there is no policy that facilitates cooperation between the distinct organizations and agencies working to combat illicit crops, in this case the Anti-narcotics Police, UNODC and Acción Social de la Presidencia de la República.
- We do not understand why the international community allows the same resources that support alternative development to also be used to fumigate areas shown both to be free of illicit crops and to be implementing programs of licit crop production.

Since we, as Community Councils, lack the security and guarantee that the licit crops we have established with such hard work will not be fumigated, we have decided to suspend the activities of the ADAM-Montebravo project. We demand that Acción Social, UNODC and the Anti-narcotics Police communicate and cooperate with one another in order to eliminate the possibility that licit crops be fumigated. The environment is being endangered as well as the lives of our leaders. The organizational processes of our collective communities are being threatened, and the hope of Afro-Colombian communities extinguished.

We feel an obligation to plead for your solidarity in order to change these policies and actions violating our rights, threatening our forms of local government, reducing our productivity, jeopardizing our survival, and destroying the biodiversity of the Colombia Pacific.

We do not understand the policies that the Colombian government has implemented during recent years with the support of the U.S. government and its Plan Colombia. Rather than combating the drug trade, the objective of these policies seems to be to combat rural communities made up of the historically excluded sectors of this country's society, namely peasants, indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians.

**Community Council of Unión Río Chagui
 Community Council of el Recuerdo de Nuestros Ancestros del Río Mejicano
 Community Council of Unión del Río Rosario**

Nirio Esmir Preciado Saya
 President, Community Council of Unión Río Chagui

Teofilo Marino Castro Sanchez
 President, Community Council of Recuerdo de Nuestros Ancestros del Río Mejicano

Apolinar Granja
 Legal Representative, Community Council of el Recuerdo de Nuestros Ancestros del Río Mejicano