

Colombia

Action on



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Meeting in Sibundoy between CSN and Kamentsá and Inga communities, around the tulpa.
Pictures by Tom Potts from CSN Buffalo

The Elders of the Inga and Kamentsá People Say, “They Want to Make Us Disappear From Our Own Lands”

By José Narciso Jamioy Muchavisoy

Translated by Anne Schoeneborn, CSN Volunteer Translator

I am a son of the people who call themselves Kabëng kamentsá—“to be as we are,” as our ancestors, the present and the future, born of the same Mother Earth of the Sibundoy-Putumayo Valley and of the same father Bëngbe Bëtsá (our creator). As the former governor of Kamentsá Community Council of Pueblo Grande—as it is recognized by history and the testament of elder Carlos Tamabioy—I extend to the whole world the voices of our elders who, in the face of threats of being physically and culturally wiped out, plead for the protection of the Kamentsá and the Inga people of the Putumayo.

During the course of the meetings held last week for the “Great Mobilization for Life, Land and Our Existence” (July 14-16, 2011), our grandfathers and grandmothers, who live in the tradition of the

“They want us to disappear from our own lands.” continued

Kamëntsá and the Inga of the Sibundoy Valley, said they are worried about the existence of these two communities, just as they are worried about the existence of all indigenous communities in the Amazon region. They feel that the sacred lands through which they, their parents, their grandparents and their ancestors walked will be destroyed by the highway that the Colombian government plans to construct, with the help of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), from San Francisco to Mocoa (in the Putumayo). This is the land where their creator left, in the hands of Mother Earth, the birthplace of air and pure water for all of humanity.

Our elders teach that the mountains and the forests form the union, united by water and the spirits of the wind, where the mountains give birth to pure waters that travel to refresh the forests. From there, they return in the form of clouds and fog to their sacred sites, transported by the spirits of the wind, where they once again are transformed into liquid water. This natural cycle of water production between the mountains and the forests was not invented by man but by his creator Bëngbe Bëtsá to guarantee a healthy life in a healthy environment. For them, he is the one who left the mountains and the forests the way they are, so they could protect the life of all. This is why, thousands of years ago, their ancestors named the Tortuga Mountain as their protector—because without the mountain, the Sibundoy Valley would not exist. The spirits of the

wind that come from the forests collide on this mountain and some of them reach this valley that 100 years ago the evangelizers called San Francisco, the place that for the Inga elders has, since the time of their ancestors, been known as Waira sacha (the trees of the wind) and that for the Kamëntsá has been known as Binjyayók (the place of the wind).

The elders say that they have walked around Shatjoshekua-benach (the path to go by foot to Mocoa) and that if the San Francisco-Mocoa highway is built, this will destroy the trees of the wind that protect the Sibundoy Valley. According to the technical studies presented by INVIAS, approximately 15,000 hectares of natural forest will be destroyed, which in the elders’ worldview means stripping and destroying our Mother Earth in order to construct 37 kilometers of highway. These are natural forests that are thousands of years old. This destruction will make way for the spirits of the wind to become enraged and rapidly dry the lands of the Sibundoy Valley. This will have devastating consequences for the ecosystem in the valley and will affect the life of all its inhabitants, its flora and its fauna.

The elders also say that because of this highway many people from other places will arrive here—people from Brazil, Peru, Ecuador—and that more bad people than good will come. These people will come to remove them from this land through the use of deception, because for them money is more important than our lives. This means

there will be more hunger for the poor indigenous Ingas and Kamëntsás and we will have to go from house to house because we are already seeing what it is like to have to pay to bury our dead, to have to pay for water, to have to pay to sell fruits and beans...for everything, we have to pay. In addition, they say that they just do not understand, so many laws that have been invented to deceive them and to remove them from the lands that were passed down to them by their grandparents, their great-grandparents and all of their other ancestors. They say that because they do not speak Spanish well, they do not always understand the explanations given by the engineers, the lawyers and the other government representatives. They say that during some meetings, they have been given food and were later made to sign a paper after which they were notified that the project or program had already been approved. They say, “because we don’t understand, we continue to suffer in silence. We are scared to speak up and complain because they say that if we make a mistake, they will take us to jail.”

Since hearing that government representatives are lying and saying that there have been 35 meetings and that approximately 1,800 of our community members have approved this highway project, the elders are even more worried. They stated, “The truth is that nobody knows much about this construction project. They have not notified us in order to discuss the construction of this highway. Our young

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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.

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people who have gone to school and understand Spanish better have told us that they are planning to build this highway where we used to walk when we were young, so that the people of other countries can move their goods through our land. It is only for this reason that we recently found out what the government is planning.”

We, as elders, see that the persecution of our communities and indigenous peoples continues. They do not want to listen to us or respect the rights that we have as the indigenous inhabitants of this land. We are not immigrants, we are Kamüentsá Yentsáng (we are children of the Mother Earth of the Sibundoy Valley). No scientist in the world has been able to show that we are immigrants, and yet they want to make us disappear from our own lands with the very serious consequences of the highway.

The elders say they are full of sorrow because, according to our young people who read the Constitution and the national and international laws, there are many rights included in these documents, and yet the Colombian government does not respect them. Recently they heard that the Constitutional Court ordered the government, through Auto No. 004 (January 26, 2009), to protect



Leader Ingá ponders the destruction by the Mocoa river

the Inga and Kamüentsá communities as well as the other 32 indigenous communities in the Amazon. Because we are on the road toward cultural and physical extinction, previous internal consultations and an analysis are to be carried out followed by the formulation of our survival plan, in which the government must guarantee the survival of the indigenous communities. In reality, however, none of this has yet been carried out.

Given the current situation, the elders ask the world to support them so that these two indigenous communities are

not wiped out physically or culturally and, above all, so that future generations are able to live in a dignified way. To this end, they ask that their lands be protected, the lands where the spirits of their ancestors, their history, their worldview, their way of life, and the sacred paths constructed by their ancestors can be found. If the land is not protected, the Kamüentsá and Inga ancestral communities will soon be wiped out for the sake of developing the market economy and constructing the San Francisco-Mocoa highway.

KILLING THE ENVIRONMENT IN EXCHANGE FOR GOLD

*By Helda Martinez,
Colombian Journalist*

*Translated by Eunice Gibson,
CSN Volunteer Translator*

The mountain ranges that flow from the Andes, that from Chile and Argentina divide South America, and that trifurcate in the Colombian Massif in the southern part of this country, are enormous sources of biodiversity and tremendous natural riches. Riches, which arouse

ambitions. Ambitions, that push forward little by little as time passes, buying consciences and denying ecological damage, adhering to their undying purpose, through the major mass media, to avoid spreading the truth. Ambitions, which invent promises to delude campesinos with immediate cash, which in the future will make them poorer, both them and their mountains.

For them, because even if the city could make them forget their past and

their farming, the money that they receive in dollars, in euros, or in pesos will not be enough to re-establish themselves in another place in new conditions, which in many cases will represent a loss in their quality of life. For their mountains, because open pit mining dries up water sources, and, along with that, the production of food crops and of species that are thousands of years old.

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Killing the Environment continued

This, among a lot of cases that are starting to be made public in Colombia, is the case of La Colosa.

FLIRTING WITH DYING

La Colosa is situated in the central mountain range, near the municipality of Cajamarca in the west central province of Tolima. There the powerful South African company Anglo Gold Ashanti (AGA) has been flirting with La Colosa for more than a decade now.

AGA doesn't turn from its purpose, and it is shielded by its persuasive economic power, and favored by the foreign intervention policies that the rightist ex-president Álvaro Uribe Vélez promoted. Up to now AGA has even achieved the partial non-recognition of Law 2 of 1959, which established the region as the Central Forest Reserve, with the aim of protecting a strip of 1.5 million hectares in ten provinces. The Reserve includes the head waters in Tolima with 167 springs. These springs come from

cloud forests, water-producing highlands (páramos), and both forest and crop-producing areas. It is the region where the lofty wax palm tree, known as the Colombian National Tree, grows. It is also the origin of the Coello River, that flows down from the mountains to the plains, watering broad fields of rice, sorghum and cotton in central and southern Tolima Province.

But these riches, a treasure that belongs to all Colombians in general and to the Tolimans in particular, mean nothing to AGA. They do not cease their flirting, only partly controlled by the Tolima authorities and by the representative of the Inspector General. Only partly, because, with authority over them, the Colombian Institute of Geology and Mining and the Ministry of Mines and Energy in the last ten years authorized them to explore 27 sites, until in 2006 they discovered the La Colosa deposit.

AGA's enthusiasm led them to assert

that La Colosa would be recognized as one of the ten largest gold deposits in the world. But they did that without telling that, in order to extract the gold that is dispersed in the rocks, they would require intensive exploitation, submitting the rock to the process of leaching, which separates the gold from the rest of the minerals. To do that they use cyanide, which contaminates the water in the soil and the subsoil.

According to a study carried out in 2009 by the Dutch organization Pax Christi, the mine would need to use a cubic meter of water per second per ton of minerals processed. And, if AGA's intention is to reach 30 million tons of mineral mined every year, that would take 950 million cubic meters of water each year. If the extraction process would last 15 years, it would consume 14.1 billion cubic meters of water in that time, depending, of course, on the dispersion or concentration of mineral in the rocks.



The majesty and beauty of the La Colosa mountain hides well its treasures.

We Mourn the Murder of Father José Restrepo

by Jack Laun

On August 28, 2011 a video featuring Father Jose Reynal Restrepo, parish priest of the historic town of Marmato, was posted on You Tube. See video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuEboypwV4>

In the video, Father Restrepo states clearly his total opposition to a plan to destroy the town of Marmato, moving it to a lowland location so that a Canadian mining company, Medoro

(which recently combined with and has taken the name of Gran Colombia Gold), could develop an open-pit gold mine on the site of the town. Four days later, Father Restrepo was murdered as he returned to Marmato from a nearby town on his motorcycle. Although the persons who ordered and carried out his murder have not been identified, few doubt that his murder is directly related to his outspoken opposition to the mine project.

As you can see in the You Tube video, Father Restrepo, who was just 36 years old, was a friendly, caring person with tremendous courage. His actions in support of what he knew to be right, even if, as he suggested, it might cost him his life, are a great lesson for all of us. We celebrate Father Restrepo's life, even as we commit ourselves to the struggle for human dignity and support for the common man that characterized his actions.

Killing the Environment continued

THE SITUATION IS GETTING WORSE

Local media, such as *El Nuevo Día* of Ibagué, the capital of Tolima Province (www.elnuevodia.com.co); national media like *El Espectador* (www.elespectador.com.co) and *El Tiempo* (www.eltiempo.com.co); and international media such as Inter Press Service Agency (www.ipsnoticias.net) have gone on record and complained about the actions of AGA in the region and of the irreparable damage to be expected. Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo has been unrestrained in supporting the lawsuit filed on behalf of the eco-system, and the complaints of ecologists, nongovernmental organizations in the region, internationals like Pax Christi, students and professors from the University of Tolima and the NGO Ecostierras, which have been continual. They have dedicated themselves without any letup to visiting the towns to explain to the campesinos the importance of maintaining the region in its natural state, so that they could continue to enjoy its riches. Their messages have been carried in the local media.

But on July 4 *Noticias Uno* (www.noticiasuno.com), an independent network, revealed the way in which the situation was getting worse. In a long report *Noticias Uno* announced that the office of the Inspector General of Colombia, (Procurador General), had changed its opinion. It now assured that “the only damage that could result would be from failing to authorize exploitation of the mines.”

Noticias Uno furnished opportunity to the campesinos in the area who were aware of how the purchase of land had increased in the last few months, and knew about the displacement of campesinos who were looking for a future that they would not find in the cities, to explain their views. And it emphasized that the main cause was the Public Ministry's change of opinion on the authorization for the mine project.

In the last few months the change of position had become evident. The former Inspector General, Edgardo Maya Villazón, and his representative in Tolima, Diego Alvarado, had opposed

it emphatically. “. . . Every time it will turn out to be contrary to legal and constitutional rules that protect and defend natural resources”, states the commentary in *Noticias Uno*.

The current Inspector General, Alejandro Ordoñez, a member of Opus Dei, and his representative, Ernesto Cardoso, on the contrary, asserted to the director of Cortolima, Carmen Sofía Bonilla, that “if we had a technical criterion, the truth is that mining is a development position that has to be respected . . .”

That is to say, mandate over logic. Incursion, without paying attention to the irreversible ecological damage. And without even mentioning the social harm that the exploration will bring, because with it will come the vices of the times, from all parts of the country: saloons, prostitutes, and easy money.

Will Inspector General Ordoñez, so faithful to his catechism, understand all of these worldly “shortcomings”?

Delegation Notes From CSN Central New York

by Sara Watrous

I traveled to Colombia in July with Colombia Support Network to visit the sister community we (Ithaca-Cortland-Syracuse) have with Cajibío, Cauca and the Movimiento Campesino (MCC) there. I traveled with three other women from Central NY. The first part of our trip, we stayed in Popayan with the family of John Henry and Marylen, leaders in the MCC. We traveled to Cajibío to work on the MCC's farm. It was amazing what they have accomplished in so little time. Their beautiful gardens, seed saving program and just the energy behind the whole project was so inspiring. We also had the opportunity to attend the coming of age celebration of Marylen's niece in Cajibío. Everyone was so welcoming. In the 10-days we were in the country, we did so much, from working on a farm to meeting with the Vice President of the country. The diversity of the experiences is what made this delegation truly unique. Meeting with families of those killed in the rural communities, but also then meeting with human rights officials in Bogotá. This made it all have a much deeper meaning. We were able to listen to stories but then go on and share them and use them to pressure for change.

It was upsetting to see the development of multinational corporations like Smurfit/Kappa (Cartón de Colombia, producer of cardboard boxes), planting pine trees as far as the eye can see, a plant that is not native to the area, when we traveled in the countryside. But there are some great groups working to fight the corporate take-over of Colombia's natural resources. We met with various organizations, such as Semillas and Censat Aqua Viva that are trying to



CSN's delegation meets with Vice President Angelino Garzon.

address this issue in various ways. It was moving to hear the stories of the family of victims of human rights violations. They have such strength. The people have such a drive to overcome these obstacles.

Despite all the hardships facing the country and its people, Colombia has such a warm culture. The dancing was so much fun. The locals took us out on various occasions; it was the Andean dancing that was especially exciting. The food was amazing and the generosity of our hosts was clear, especially in the delicious meals they shared with us. It was such an eye-opening experience that has truly marked me. I now feel an even stronger responsibility to fight for justice in the Americas and it has become even more personal. I look forward to the visit of those from the sister community and returning in a few years to see how everyone is doing. In the meantime, I am keeping busy involved in the community here at home.

Notes on our Delegation's Visit to Bogotá

As the description of CSN/Central New York chapter member Sara Watrous and the article by Kamentsa elder Jose Narciso indicate, the first part of the joint CSN/Central New York and CSN/Buffalo delegation was spent by each in their respective sister communities of Cajibío and Sibundoy. The second part, with the chapters combined, took place in Bogotá. As Sara says, we met there with environmental organizations Censat Aqua Viva and Semillas. And we met with human rights defenders Fathers Alejandro Angulo and Javier Giraldo at the headquarters of the Jesuit think tank CINEP. We also met with Vice President Angelino Garzon at his office, where we reviewed with him for about 45 minutes our concerns about threats to the Cajibío community and its leaders, and increased paramilitary activity in the area, and of the failure

to conduct prior consultations with the Kamentsa and Inga indigenous communities before approving the new highway project which these communities believe will destroy their way of life. Vice President Garzon promised to follow up on our concerns by sending letters to government officials responsible for consultations with the indigenous communities. We also met with Ministry of Interior officials to express our great concern about the threats to our sister

communities. They took notes and agreed to follow up on these matters. Finally, we met with U.S. Embassy officials, including human rights officer Amanda Porter. We discussed what we had encountered on our visits to our sister communities and challenged U.S. policies and practices advancing the interests of multinational businesses and funding the Colombian Armed Forces, linked as they are to illegal paramilitaries, which have increased the threats to these communities.



Walking towards the site for the new road on the old trading path between Andean and Amazonic communities

The Colombia Support Network

Action on Colombia

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