

Jonne & Dave—

Here are Cecilia's notes from her "pre-trip" in September. We will not be doing all the things she did, such as the canoe trip up a river. But this gives a lot of helpful information.

I could not find it in my e-mail, but I had it on paper, so I scanned it into the computer and converted it to .pdf.

Bob

TRAVELING TO THE PUTUMAYO

Report from Cecilia Zarate-Laun

September 2 -9, 2007

Pasto, Sibundoy (Alto Putumayo)

Mocoa (Medio Putumayo)

El Tigre Corregimiento or unincorporated town belonging to La Hormiga, near the Ecuadorian border

On Sunday September 2, I initiated my trip, which was planned as an exploratory trip to prepare for the delegation of our Kansas City chapter to its sister community. The diocese of Putumayo was the local contact organization, under the leadership of Father Campo Elias de la Cruz, who visited Kansas City last year. The Putumayo diocese organized my appointments and agenda.

When I arrived in Bogota on Sunday night my luggage did not arrive with me. I had to improvise my wardrobe, since I was leaving the next day at 6 a.m. In Pasto I was picked up by a trusted driver selected by Father Campo and off we went on a scenic trip in the beautiful Andes mountains, going to Sibundoy. After a brief stop in Pasto to buy toiletries and clothes, we drove through parts of Narino state and parts of Putumayo which are mountainous and cold, but extremely beautiful: full of forests and waterfalls. After 4 hours of travel, I saw one of the most beautiful valleys I have ever seen in my life: el Valle del rio Sibundoy, arriving there at 1 p.m. The town is one of the headquarters of the Diocese of Mocoa-Sibundoy. It has a plaza with a unique selection of acacia trees which suffered a disease and were cut. But in the remaining healthy trunks local artists carved colored sculptures of the history and legends of the Putumayo which you can see in my

annexed picture.



Father Campo met me and, after lunch, we went to see a garden project by displaced families from the Bajo Putumayo who sell their produce to local families. The garden is located on land belonging to the Diocese. After that we went to the ongoing meeting of the Comision Vida Justicia y Paz of the Diocese, where I met its members, among them its president Reverend Mario Toro, a Franciscan priest who formerly was head of the Franciscans in Colombia. I was graciously welcomed at the meeting, where they were discussing having a public debate with the candidates for governor of Putumayo in the upcoming October elections. One of the subjects of the debate will be the question of what happened to the pacts between the government and the peasants. Late that afternoon we went to a meeting of all the parishes of Alto Putumayo, where the lay people described their participation in different activities in the near town of Colon. After that we visited a hot water bath with water coming from a nearby volcano. The guide explained that when the weather outside is cold, the water automatically becomes warmer and viceversa. We came back to Sibundoy to a warm dinner and singing session, with Father Campo showing his mastering of the guitar.

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 4 OFF TO EL TIGRE AND VISITING THE COFANES

On Tuesday, very early in the morning, we took public transportation in route to Mocoa, the capital of Putumayo, to meet the head of Pastoral Social Father Julio Burban. He is very interested in CSN's project and assigned Gildardo Aranzalez from his office to accompany us to El Tigre. We took the bus, a ride of 4 more hours, to El Tigre, where the indigenous communities we visited are located. Riding the bus we went on a partly

paved road built around the oil pipeline that takes oil to the Pacific coast. We passed next to the military base of Santa Ana . The Colombian army constantly patrols this area to protect the pipeline from being attacked by the FARC.

We arrived at El Tigre at 2 p.m, just in time to have some lunch and to take a canoe to our first appointment with the Cofan nation at their resguardo (reservation), half an hour up the Guamuez river.



We arrived at the resguardo of the Cabildo Cofan at the Valle del Guamuez/San Miguel, where we were received by the authorities of the Cofan people and members of this community.

Willington Chaparro spoke in the name of the community. He talked about being in the process of recovering their culture as indigenous people and the reconstruction of the country as a whole, since the current situation is very serious because of the fumigations and attacks by the military. Recently a military helicopter destroyed their little school. They want access to education and the recovery of their ancestral territory. He said that they have been affected directly or indirectly by the coca industry. He says the indigenous are an ethical voice in the neo-liberal world. What has affected them the most have been the fumigations, which have caused more than 40,000 displaced persons in the Putumayo. The Cofans told how these fumigations have affected their economic situation. The most important issue for them is to rescue their culture from western world influence and the need to strengthen their identity, their mother tongue and its grammar, their unique vision of the cosmos and their own wisdom, because this will give them strength and respect. They want to do this with others to reconstruct society and to share what they have in order to rescue life. They want people of good faith and good will to

help them in different areas, technological, professional and economic, so they will have a team accompanying them.

Then another leader, Libardo, talked about developing their own education in Santa Rosa del Guamuez. They are developing their own Plan de Vida del pueblo Cofan (Life Project of the Cofan People), having a permanent session where they realized that ethno-education must be their priority. In their department of Putumayo they have the first 4 centers of ethno- education, which strengthens their cultures which every day become more organized in spite of having enemies oppose to all these processes. The Cofanes want to advance and consolidate this area, so they can have more indigenous teachers to prepare and educate children in each community. Many years ago they did not know what an indigenous teacher was and now they have more than 40 teachers in 18 schools. They need infrastructure and the creation of a special college .

Libardo then spoke about the fumigations. He said that in the indigenous communities they have reflected a lot in order to create consciousness about manual eradication of the coca plant and also thinking about how not to let themselves die of hunger. When the coca business came, it brought with it a change in their cosmo-vision of the world, but this is like a tree that destroys its branches, leaving the roots which are still alive.

Another leader, Julio, spoke about how the fumigations have been a social, political and economic problem and how the armed groups have stopped their development. He mentioned how the government gives a little but does not solve the real problems. He is concerned about the Cofanes losing some of their own territory each day, and with this they lose their cultural identity. He mentioned that they are an original Amazonic tribe dating back to the origins of time. They need to have projects to recover their territory, in order to have their culture of hunting and fishing, with productive projects according to the Life Project of the Cofan nation. He emphasized the loss of their original territory and with this the loss of their sacred places and of their values. Their land is being taken by colonizers, who invade their soil. The Cofanes need to recover their territory in order to protect the eco-system and especially to recover their traditional medicine in order to use it. They are the protectors of the yage plant. He said that they want to protect their traditional medicine, strengthen the cabildos(indigenous community councils) and communicate with other cultures, with their own system of government and their own justice system, rescuing and implementing their ancestral laws. They need alternative development projects, because they need food security for the short , medium and long term. Julio accused the Army brigade of eating their chickens.

We were delighted when the indigenous bilingual teacher invited her 5 year-old pupils to sing for us old Cofan songs in their own language.

We went back to El Tigre before dark and felt the different voices and noises of the nearby rainforest. I was exhausted after such a long day and went to bed immediately

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 5, VISITING THE EMBERA CHAMIES

Early in the morning I had the pleasure of meeting the young parish priest, Father Luis Hernan Miramar, who has been the first and only parish priest in El Tigre. He is highly loved and respected and I was very impressed by his commitment and dedication to the people. He told me that the place is called El Tigre because in older times jaguars (which are the Americas version of tigers) used to come to drink water at the Guamuez river at this spot. Not anymore, since jaguars have almost totally been exterminated. He explained to me how the indigenous communities have suffered terrible hunger because of the fumigations. The day before our visit two little girls were sent to the parish to collect food supplies because they had no food at all.



We left early for a long, long walk to two reservations of the Embera Chamies : Argelia and Las Palmas, where there were also representatives of a third resguardo La Italia, which is located very far away. However, all three are one community. We were very graciously received with lots of songs and dances and music in their own language. I walked most of the time along the wet, muddy rainforest path, and only at the end did I ride the horse we had with us. We were warmly welcomed by about 200 members of the Embera Chamies, including the Governor and the Jaibanas (or religious leaders). The agenda was as read by the Secretary of the Cabildo :

1. Welcoming greeting by the Governor and the Jaibanas plus the visiting organizations
2. Cultural Dance
3. A song in our language
4. Dances

5. Proposal of the joint work to do by the organizations and discussion
6. Musical offering
7. Ending ceremony

The Governor and the Alcalde Mayor (Head of the Cabildo) welcomed us to their chidria which means land in the Embera language. He said that they represent the three Cabildos of the Embera-Chami and their goal is to fight to defend Mother Earth. They want to achieve unity of territory and to keep their autonomy and culture. They want support and follow up because they do not have defenders. They want to preserve their unique culture, clothing, practices and customs. There are provisions in the Constitution for them, but these rules are violated by the state itself. They cannot talk to the government, because the government officials pay no attention to them. As an indigenous organization they follow the ideals of



CRIC (Corporacion Regional Indigena del Cauca), always in the struggle doing resistance because they have not disappeared. They struggle with their peasant brothers and Afro-Colombians all of whom suffer discrimination by the State. The Army abuses all of them. The CIA is more dangerous than the FARC they say. The State is afraid of their traditional authorities. The Embera-Chami say "we have leaders who are preparing themselves to defend our wealth and our land. Life is not a business, money does not give us identity but our identity gives us protection. The armed actors must be punished and impunity has to be stopped." They are grateful that we came to see the needs of their people. They emphasized that their leaders are threatened and that they are all of them ready to give their lives for their land, and it is for this that they are struggling. They also

talked about defending what they call their Law of Origin, which is the set of rules to administer their own justice so they are judged by their own Council of Elders, and their Plan de Vida which each Cabildo is working on. The Elders are the leaders because they have the experience.

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

After lunch we started a long, long walk to the Cabildo Las Palmas, also of the Embera nation. There was no horse, so off we walked.

The whole community welcomed us at their resguardo. They started talking about ethno-education focused on their customs and on taking care of the environment so they pass on their vision to the children. They consider crucial the good handling of their own culture. They are organized in a very spiritual form, which gives them strength and unity. Their culture is based on the wisdom of the elderly to be transmitted to the children who will defend their territory. For them selling the land is like selling their mother. They should be united in resistance, taking care of their ancestors, their cultivation practices and their sacred places. According to their cosmology, unity is what gives them strength and this ideology is what guides the principles of their Plan de Vida. Their main issues are :

1. Territory

Their territory is to be worked on. It is like a second mother that gives them life and wealth to live with harmony and freedom. It is never to be destroyed. The colonizers say that the Indians do not work because they do not cut trees, but what they do not realize is that wood is sacred to the indigenous communities. They said they also have to protect water because the Third World War would be for water and they intent to resist to defend the waters.

2. Education

Based on inter culturalism, the instruction in indigenous schools will impart not only general knowledge as in the Colombian educational system but will also focus on the Putumayo and particularly on the Valle del Guamuez. The indigenous apply their own education with respect to water, following quichua, cofan, pastos, nasas and embera principles. They do not close their doors. They share their cultures to promote union, customs, spirituality and sacred places, so the little ones do not forget their mother's culture. All of this enriches their minds and creates a sense of belonging. Julio said the like saying : " I know who I am, where do I come from, where I am, what is it that I want, what are my dresses, my customs, my food, my dances. I love my land because it is my mother."

Each cultural ethnic group handles its way of thinking with respect to ethno-education. Each Plan de Vida has relation to Mother Earth. The authorities keep their philosophical traditions and they learn from them how to love nature, natural medicine and traditions which open their minds. The elders discover new things when they do their traditional ceremonies, upon which they reflect and cry, being the great philosophers that they are.

Ethno education also makes them reflect on the importance of inter-cultural issues and on how they have learned from many people who showed solidarity with Colombia, people from other countries who have shown interest in our culture and identity and had given support to their political process.

3. Autonomy

This point refers to the form of how they use arms. Others use arms to kill people. The Embera- Chami use their wood canes, which give them spiritual power according to the norms of the Embera culture. This is a way to show how their culture has worked doing resistance in an organized way for so many years, accompanied by the spiritual strength drawn from those who died leaving a memory of carrying out resistance with the profound value of loving their land.

They invited Father Campo Elias to say a few words and he reflected on their spiritual strength and the respectful accompaniment that the church is giving to them. They are the actors and the builders of the future because they pass on their way of thinking to their children. According to the indigenous theology and its respect for land, the environment and spirituality, today they are an ethical voice for the whole the world.

Father Hernan talked about the university for ethno- education, which costs \$150 per semester to pay for a student. Each student prepares a thesis, which should correspond to their ethnic identity and their territory.

Then Luis, another leader, spoke and said that the Embera culture has been alive in their hands since before Christ. And he said they are descendants of the Mayas. He reminded all of us of the traumatic list of their sufferings when the Spaniards stole, massacred, enslaved and killed their philosophers. He also reminded us of how Simon Bolivar left laws respecting indigenous and Afro-Colombians. He talked about the fumigations and how they have no food, how the children suffer malnutrition and how the effects of glyphosphate affect the environment. They do not want more war. They want people to think about the future for the children. He talked about how the government violates their norms and contaminates their environment. They want to grow rice as an alternative crop, but need a ricemill in order to process it and sell it.

Someone from the community requested donations of guitars, drums, quenenas, flute and charrascas for their musical group.

THURSDAY MORNING AT BREAKFAST

Before going to Puerto Asis to catch my noon flight to Bogota I had working breakfast meeting with Father Campo Elias, Father Hernan and Gildardo to strategize for the CSN delegation. We discussed :

- 1) Political part
 - a. Vision of the region, location, geography
 - b. Current political situation
 - c. Indigenous communities
 - d. Situation and needs in the US and Kansas City in particular

- 2) Logistics
 - a. Dates
 - b. Places to stay and food and transportation
 - c. Appointments with local authorities
 - d. What to tell them the Military and Police
- 3) Sister parish in Kansas City for El Tigre parish
- 4) Needs : to bring sheets, towels, lantern, knee- long rubber boots, malaria and yellow fever vaccines, mosquito nets, wet paper towels, toilet paper and more to think about.
- 5) In Bogota it was suggested the delegation visit the Minister of Interior section of indigenous affairs, the US embassy, Vice president Santos, the Defensoria and the Embassy of Ecuador, besides the usual other NGO's .