



Young musicians at Kamentsa school.

## VISITING SIBUNDOY

By Julia Tienison

I was so thrilled when Cecilia asked me to write a reflection piece on Sibundoy. Our few days there, were for me, the most memorable part of our entire two weeks. I could say so much but to try and keep it succinct I am going to focus in on two of the most impactful experiences; our visit to the bi-lingual Spanish and Kamëntsá school, and the lunch at Carmenza's Mother's home on our last day with Taita Arturo and his daughter.

It was pouring down rain as our van pulled into the school and the eight of us barreled out. We walked into one of the classrooms, the students all about fourteen. They stared at us, their faces so timid and curious. I locked eyes with a boy up front who looked so deeply shy, yet remained very attentive to our introductions. Their teacher was prideful in talking about the importance of preserving the Kamëntsá language and teachings of their culture. A group of younger students entered the classroom toting instruments—a guitar, two types of flutes, a drum and a washboard-sounding gourd that was played with a stick. The group of five students, ages

# VISITING SIBUNDOY continued

8-10, played three songs for us, each intuitively playing every instrument with confidence and fluidity. Their songs invoked tears, the rhythm soothing and affirming. Following this performance, we were escorted to the gazebo in back of the building. It was muddy, the rain still pouring. We trudged thru to gather closely in the gazebo, circling around the fire pit in the center. A taita appeared and began a ceremonial ritual. He lit a sage-like smelling powder and wafted the aromas to each of our noses as he circled the room with a lulling chant. Carmenza stood up and spoke afterward. She introduced our group, explained the importance of our solidarity, talked of their fight to preserve their culture and maintain their identity. She spoke of the natural world as an equal, the grave struggles they face, and the importance of the youth carrying on their message and the value in identifying and being part of the Kamëntsá. Her message was unwavering and her soul poured into every word. I so desperately wanted to affirm all that she had said and impart my gratitude. Although, when I stood up to speak, my eyes welled with tears and my throat became tight. I said what I was able to. I wanted these young kids to realize how impactful this had been for us. How I particularly, being the youngest and blondest of our group, was greatly moved by their culture, by their beliefs, and by this experience. It was a feeling

beyond words. I imagine what I felt in that moment to be a fleeting glimpse of the intrinsic connection they have for their culture, values and tradition.

Our very last visit was the trip to Carmenza's Mother's home. She and her sister both live there as well, but she made it very clear that it was her Mother's home, and not hers. Carmenza is half Kamëntsá, which she inherits from her Mom. She strongly identifies herself, as being Kamëntsá, although does not speak the language; the Catholic Church shunned it. They were encouraged to assimilate and reject their indigenous roots. However, Carmenza's Mother, Maria Clara, still holds on to the language. When we are all seated to eat, along with Taita Arturo and his daughter, she begins with a traditional welcoming prayer. There are two translations that happen in order for all of us to understand; Kamëntsá to Spanish and Spanish to English. It seems frivolous in some ways because the sentiment is felt, even when the words themselves are not understood. Our visit continues, Carmenza and her sister prepare and deliver the food. We start with tea, then a hot broth full of hominy followed by plates of rice, chicken and potatoes. Even the two vegetarians in our group eat the chicken, knowing that the birds probably wandered freely out back just days before. This living is simple. I clear the table, gathering our plates

to bring back to the kitchen. There's a dirt floor, no light, a dual burner camping stove, intricate spider webs are spun in the corners, and a large metal pot sits propped up on a pile of smoldering wood. I am reminded of the commodities I take for granted. I return to the group, bringing coffee for everyone. Taita Arturo has been somewhat of a brother to Carmenza. He looks after her family and has been an outspoken, dutiful leader to the town. His wife is a dedicated bilingual schoolteacher, who we had just met prior. His daughter, in her mid-twenties, also shares with us and is just as eloquent as Carmenza. We finish the meal with some closing statements. My Dad speaks up to express his gratitude for the experience and for the fact that he is able to share this time with me, his daughter. As he goes on to share all that we have witnessed in our time and the solidarity he feels, tears roll down his cheeks. Others start to get choked up as well. A translation must happen, but it is clear that regardless of whether the words are understood, the sentiment is deeply felt.

Sibundoy left all of us feeling more connected, more united. The word "solidarity" had been used throughout our trip, which of course is a central part of Colombia Support Network. However, it was not until our trip to Sibundoy that the word truly became defined, felt and real.

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.

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# A Visit to the Santurban Paramo

*By David Kast*

The July 16-30, 2015, CSN delegation to Colombia consisted of leader Jack Laun, Steven Bray, Alina Diaz, Jack Herbert, David Kast, Thane Tienison and his daughter Julia Tienison, Marta Zarate and Beatriz Vejarano, our primary interpreter. Our first stop was in Bucaramanga on the way to the Santurban Paramo in Santander Department.

Paramos are unique and delicate areas of the northern Andes and parts of southern Central America which are extremely important for their production and conservation of water, as well as for their ecological diversity and beauty. They are located between roughly 3000 and 5000 meters (9000-15000 ft) above sea level and about ½ of all South American paramos are in Colombia. Because of their environmental and social importance they have been legally protected from human incursion, particularly mining which uses tremendous amounts of water, is destructive through soil removal and makes excessive use of extractive chemicals. However the current administration of President Santos views mining as part of its “development locomotive” and is trying to redefine the lower limits of the paramos to allow mining in the gold rich areas of the lower paramos. In the Santurban paramo area Eco Oro, a Canadian mining company, is engaged in current exploration and would like a license for further large-scale mining. Most profits from large-scale mining go abroad into the coffers of large multinationals, unlike the profits from small-scale artisan mining which remain within the local communities of Colombia. The current administration of President Santos is favoring multinational exploitation of

resources at the cost of displacement and elimination of small-scale mining.

The metropolitan area of Bucaramanga relies on water that runs from the paramo. Many groups in Bucaramanga oppose the proposed mine by Eco Oro because of the negative impact it will have on the purity and quantity of water available to the city. In Bucaramanga we met first with the local manager (gerente), Mario Penalosa, a native of Bucaramanga, and administrators of Eco Oro from public relations, environmental advisement, and technology. Mr. Penalosa dominated the conversation: he claimed that Eco Oro was “abiding by all existing laws” and would be certain during and after mining that all water returned to the ground was 100% cleaned and the site itself returned to its original state. Besides knowing the impossibility of any 100% cleaning of water or reversal of damage, we were shortly to visit the Eco Oro site and witness some of the irreversible destruction already caused by the initial “mere” explorations, many as large as local artisan mines.

The next day we left for the city of California, located near local artisan mining operations and also the large Eco Oro operation further into the paramo. Mary Luz, a tour organizer from California whose family operates a small-scale mine, guided us and described the problems the artisan (small-scale) miners faced, as well as the danger of large-scale mining to the environment and the water supply of Bucaramanga. Small artisan miners have existed here for almost 500 years. Although they have caused a certain degree of pollution and environmental destruction that needs to be addressed, their total impact over that time period has been comparatively minimal. Also,

they are located below the paramo. Many of these mines existed before the time of legal deeds for property and not all have been able to acquire them. The government calls many of these illegal mines, ‘legally’ appropriates them and sells them to the Eco Oro and other mining interests. But Eco Oro has also done good public relations in a certain style: it has offered jobs to people, is offering social projects and scholarships for students and promises to clean up any destruction it creates. This has divided the people, including the small artisan miners. We and other environmental and human rights groups are convinced from current evidence and large-scale mining history generally that Eco Oro will not be able to keep its promises, that it knows this, that the environmental impact will be immense, and eventually the jobs for locals will dry up and the water sources and paramo will be greatly compromised, polluted, and reduced.

While in California we visited the current Eco Oro exploration site and went past it to a small high lake known as the Laguna de Paez. These visits took two days.

The Eco Oro site which straddles the public road was blocked with a chain and armed military and we had to provide passports and other information before being allowed to pass. This greatly upset a number of our Colombian delegates, who rebuked the company personnel there for blocking a public road. We were also assigned a military escort further up the road for the long hike up to the Laguna de Paez. That location was quite spectacularly beautiful.

On the way down we saw several and visited one of the artisan mines. Its operation was described to us and we were able to hear of some of



# A visit continued

the difficulties they had in securing titles and complying with expensive government environmental regulations and permit requirements, which are applied equally to both large and small mines without regard to size or relative environmental impact, and for which the artisan miners were given no help.

In California the first evening we met with a group of the artisan miners interested in stopping the Eco Oro mine. With us was Yamil Amar from Marmato, who had helped lead a successful campaign against large-scale mining there. He spoke to the California miners about the need to organize and join with other mining communities around the country. The

next evening we met with the mayor of California, who had formerly worked for Greystar gold mining, subsequently renamed Eco Oro. He was in many ways typically political trying to please everyone, both the small miners and Eco Oro, consequently speaking in a quite confusing and contradictory manner. He said he thought he as mayor should not oppose plans which it is the national government's role to prepare and execute. He also noted that he would only be mayor for a short time in the future, since municipal elections would be held on October 25, 2015.

Observation of the Eco Oro site made clear that Eco Oro has already done considerable irreversible

environmental damage, including some mountainside removal. Even in the "small" exploratory stage a great deal of water is being used, taken from the paramo. And the national military is being used to protect the Eco Oro interests. Eco Oro has not yet received a license to mine, with only exploration allowed to this point. It is unclear if the mine will be stopped. In large part this will depend on the ability of the local artisan miners and activists from both California and Bucaramanga to mobilize large numbers of the citizenry to protest the mine.



Delegation participants David Kast (left), Marta Zarate (4th from left) and Julia Tienson (5th from left) with college students at Santurban.



# Visit with Lawyers' Collective of Bucaramanga

By David Kast

Our July 16-30, 2015, delegation to Colombia began in Bucaramanga where on our first evening we were given dinner by the Corporacion Colectivo de Abogados, a lawyers collective started by Luis Carlos Perez and in large part organized and run by women lawyers. We were served the meal at their offices and before, during and after the meal several of the lawyers explained a number of projects they worked on.

The women lawyers who spoke to us work in parts of four neighboring departments (states): Santander, Norte de Santander, Bolivar, and Antioquia. They support the rights of campesinos and indigenous, defend and accompany victims of human rights violations, defend leaders and participants in social protest and generally work to help develop democratic and pluralistic institutions, as well as peaceful, negotiated settlements in areas of conflict. It is dangerous work; their offices have been attacked and they have been personally threatened many times.

The collective has been funded for 15 years by numerous friends: universities, international human rights funders, Bread for the World, students from abroad, peace brigades, other lawyers' collectives and NGOs.

Some of their issues include fighting against impunity for human rights violators and working to strengthen victims groups. They have represented victims in cases before local courts and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

They discussed with us the problem of false positives (3,500 between 2002

and 2008) and made clear that many of the false positives were not activists, simply ordinary campesinos or other workers who were killed and dressed as guerillas in order to gain a body count. Soldiers were often paid extra for a body count of "guerillas."

They also pointed out to us that by law there are supposed to be mechanisms for community input in all multinational operations, e.g. mining operations or dams, but that these mechanisms were often ignored or denied. Regarding international trade agreements they related that the Environment Ministry had asked the Justice Department if banning mining would violate trade agreements. One of the huge problems with international trade agreements involves restrictions these agreements often put on governments' rights to regulate the activities of multinationals, particularly those regulations that might lead to "future loss of income".

The collective also expressed their

concern with the redefining of the paramos in support of large mining interests. In many ways the problems they work on and the mining issues are linked in defense against corporate and multinational takeovers in the four departments in which they work. The lawyers were primarily young, some still students, upbeat and positive, energetic and inspiring, particularly when one recognizes the personal risk they daily place themselves in.

The next day several of the collective members and students joined us on our trip to California.

## MESSAGE FROM OUR READERS

Dear CSN ;

Beatriz Vejarano's letter was very moving – we are all concerned about the peace process in Colombia and continue to pray for a solution soon. We keep all of you in our daily prayer. Bon courage!

Peace, Margie and Bill Deschene



Earlier CSN delegation members with Kamentsa hosts in the Sibundoy Valley.

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# DISCUSSION OF MY TRIP TO BUCARAMANGA AND CALIFORNIA IN THE DEPARTAMENT OF SANTANDER

*By Yamil Amar Cataño*

At the invitation of the Colombia Support Network in the person of Cecilia Zarate, I describe the experiences I had in the Department (Province) of Santander, as well as discuss the struggle in defense of small-scale (artisan) mining and of the territory in which we have engaged in Marmato. This struggle originated because of the invasión into our mining community by the Canadian Company now known as “Grancolombia Gold”.

On the first day of my arrival in Bucaramanga, with Doctora Beatriz Vejarano accompanying me, I engaged in a discussion with students from several different faculties of the Industrial University of Santander (UIS), at approximately 2:30 p.m. In this meeting I explained the details of what has been done in Marmato by the company and by us in the defense of small-scale mining and of the territory. Our actions have permitted us up until now to keep the mining company from advancing in its plans, in spite of its having the support of the government on its three levels (municipal, provincial and national) and in spite of all its economic and logistical means.

I began by making comments to the students about the types of problems which can arise, not only in Bucaramanga but also in its metropolitan área and in municipalities

in other provinces which depend upon water sources originating in the paramo (highlands between 3,000 and 5,000 meters above sea level) of Santurban. The Canadian multinational Eco Oro but also two other companias have mining sites where they propose to develop mines to remove the gold and silver riches proven to lie within the mountain. After an analysis, and understanding that the situation of Marmato is distinct, since here in Marmato we defend not only the riches which we say should be for the residents who are native to Marmato and the town which is located close to the mines. In Santander, meanwhile, the strategy of defense should be articulated between the cities and towns which can, because of the irrational mining exploitation, wind up without the vital liquid (wáter). For that reason it is necessary to begin right now an aggressive policy using distinct means to make the communities aware of this threat.

In the afternoon hours, in the popular institution known by the name Compromiso (Commitment), meetings were held with academics and defenders of Human Rights. In these meetings we learned of bitter experiences which, because of the action of the government and of businesses which carry out their activities with the blessing of the same government, affect defenseless communities and persons.

On the next day we, the members of the delegation from the United States and Colombian students, professors and community leaders, visited the community of California, where we listened to several of their leaders, among them the mayor, and it was concluded that the municipality, instead of receiving benefits, has been harmed, since the economy has been affected, where previously it was made dynamic by the work of the small-scale miners.

When we went up to the paramo of Santurban on the next day, we could see the natural disaster which will occur if the national government is permissive with those who out of economic ambition wish to devastate it. On the way up to Santurban we encountered a checkpoint of the Eco Oro Company on a public road, where, according to them, to be able to pass required prior consent, not without previously providing the complete names and numbers of the personal identifying documents of those who wish to travel upon the road. For that reason we lost an hour and a half, until after protests and communications we were allowed to continue up the road until we came to a “high mountain” military



# A Few Notes on the Peace Process

By Jack Laun

post. From there on we walked for an hour and a half until we arrived at the small lake known as the Laguna de Paez.

On the next day we had meetings with other groups involved in the effort to protect natural resources, among them those who have been harmed by the construction of the Hidrosogomoso Dam, whose owner is Isagen, which in fact, being a successful money-making enterprise owned by the Colombian state, is the subject of an initiative to deliver it to private investors.

When the Colombia Support Network delegation visited Marmato a few days later, its members could see for themselves the different sectors of the urban área and participated in the conversations necessary to analyze the present situation, which is one of a tense calm, since the activity of the multinational in the community maintains a low profile. But we call it the “sleeping lion”. We don’t know when it may wake up, and we should be prepared for when it does.

It only remains for me to thank Jack, as the President of the Colombia Support Network, and his wife Cecilia, for permitting me to exchange views with other peoples who, like us, are exposed to the voraciousness of savage capitalism.

An interview in the Barranquilla newspaper El Heraldo with Enrique Santiago, a Spanish lawyer who represents the FARC guerrillas in their peace talks with the Colombian Government, suggests both the advances and the limits of the negotiations for peace taking place in Havana. Enrique, whom I had the pleasure of meeting some years ago, notes that the points of agreement being negotiated between the FARC and the Government will have to be implemented by legislation to be passed by the Colombian Congress. Yet there is no agreement to date on how “agents of the State”, members of the Colombian Army and Police, are to be treated where they are found to have committed crimes. And the Santos Government has not recognized the existence of paramilitaries in the country. It continues to assert that there are only “bacrim”---criminal gangs. This is following the fiction asserted by President Santos’s predecessor, Alvaro Uribe Velez, who said that the paramilitaries were demobilized through the Law of Justice and Peace during his administration and the illegal armed actors who remained were simply “bacrim”. Just a few days ago U.S. Ambassador Kevin Whitaker told a group of visitors from the United States in the human rights field that his view is that there are no paramilitaries in Colombia. We at CSN know of continuing paramilitary actions and threats against the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado and other rural Colombian communities with which we are in contact, and we remember that “paramilitarism” was a strategy suggested to the Colombian government by General William Yarborough’s 1962 military mission sent there by President John F. Kennedy. As Enrique Santiago asks in his interview, if the Colombian government asserts that there are no paramilitary forces, when there very much are, how is the government going to guarantee the non-repetition of the violence?

As Attorney Santiago says in his interview in discussing the thinking of FARC leaders participating in the Havana Peace Talks, the Colombian Government will have to change its position with respect to the role of the Armed Forces, departing from the view that its role is to insure “national security”, which has implied a war against the Colombian people themselves, and focusing instead on the traditional role of a national army, to protect the country’s borders and repel attacks by other countries. I think we citizens of the United States should be aware that the “national security doctrine” has long been encouraged by our government for use in Latin American countries, including through training of Latin American military officers at the School of the Americas (now called WHINSEC).

One further point on which there apparently is no agreement so far is the structure of organization in the countryside. Several rural communities in Colombia have indicated they wish to protect their lands through establishment of “zonas de reserva campesina” (campesino reserve zones). While we do not yet know the details of the Peace Talks’ plans for rural development, the government has placed a hold on official recognition of the “reserve zones”. And, apart from the peace negotiations, the Colombian Government has continued to promote and expand the

anti-riot police (called the ESMAD---escuadrones moviles anti-disturbios). The ESMAD have responded with violence against peaceful protests of government actions to build hydroelectric dams on rivers, flooding campesinos’ croplands, and to deny rights to small-scale miners, among other actions. This repressive policy of the government seems inconsistent with meaningful peace and justice in the Colombian countryside.

There are other significant issues still unresolved. One of the most important is how the Colombian people will be asked to approve the Agreement once it is successfully negotiated. The FARC have said they want a Constituent Assembly---essentially a constitutional convention---to ratify the Agreement, while the government negotiators have proposed a referendum as the means of approval. There is now mention of a plebiscite as a possible means of popular ratification of the Agreement. There are also complicated issues of how victims and families of victims will be compensated for human rights violations by the FARC and by government forces, as well as how and to what degree wealthy contributors who established and paid for paramilitary and other illegal forces should be tried and punished through the courts authorized through the Peace Process. And, significantly, how all of these institutions and investigations will be paid for.

Even with all of the above uncertainties and concerns, the negotiations for peace deserve our support. The FARC and Government negotiators have put a great deal of effort into these negotiations and have resolved many issues. We hope the goal of arriving at peace with justice does not escape them.

## The Colombia Support Network

*Action on Colombia*

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