

Afro-Colombian Organizing after Displacement and Involuntary Migration

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IN AUGUST 2007 WITH THE HELP OF A Clark University Faculty Development Grant, I went back to Colombia to pick up a thread of research on black ethnocultural organizing that I had begun a decade ago. I was specifically interested in learning what happens to organized black groups from the Pacific lowlands of Colombia after they have been displaced or forced to migrate involuntarily to the Andean interior. What I learned from my experience during the past summer and the resulting research is that conjunctures, contradictions and contingencies continue to accompany the unfoldings of Afro-Colombian social movements.

The adoption of the new Colombian constitution in 1991 and of Law 70 (the law granting ethnic and territorial rights to Afro-Colombians) in 1993 seemed to herald a dawn of a more peaceful era for the country and of a new hope for black communities. But less than a decade after adopting a new constitution, Colombia faced another impasse. After a brief and abortive attempt at peace talks with insurgents, the official response became one of stepping up the military offensive (against guerrillas and drug traffickers) and economic opening—policies that are maintained to this day. Both efforts have the financial and political backing of the United States. The U.S.-funded Plan Colombia started as an anti-drug campaign but soon expanded into an armed offensive against guerrillas. In 2000, the Clinton Administration approved an initial U.S. \$1.3 billion aid package for Colombia. This aid consisted mainly of two forms. The first included herbicides, helicopters and spraying equipment to aerially fumigate and destroy coca crops. The second was in the form of weapons, military equipment, intelligence, personnel, and training for Colombian army and police. A small component, less than a fourth of the total amount, was earmarked for “alternative development projects” to promote the cul-

tivation and marketing of non-narcotic crops. Most of the fumigation and drug clearance operations were concentrated in the Putumayo and Cauqueta regions of southern Colombia, but the ripple effect was felt in the Pacific states where black organizing was concentrated.

Since the late 1990s, local communities in the Pacific have been increasingly caught in the crossfire, or become specific targets of violence, death and displacement. The Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (*Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y Desplazamiento*, CODHES), one of the most respected and authoritative non-governmental sources on Internationally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Colombia, estimates that between 1995 and 2005 3 million people were forced to flee their homes because of violence related to armed struggles or disputes over territory and resources (CODHES and Pastoral Social 2006: 1). According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, despite the supposed demobilization of paramilitary groups in 2005, internal displacement figures remain on the rise: from 45,000 in 2005 to 67,000 in 2006 and an estimated 72,000 in 2007. IDPs tend to belong disproportionately to minority groups, with Afro-Colombians accounting for around 33% of the 412,500 persons displaced during 2002.

As black communities literally and figurative “lost ground” in the Pacific, Afro-Colombian movements faced new splits and splinters. On the one hand, the mid-1990s saw a proliferation of local Community Councils formulating proposals for collective land titles. However, with the acceleration of armed violence and the targeted killing of leaders and activists, local Community Councils could not exert control over their lands even if they had managed to obtain collective titles.

On the other hand, the number of black communities displaced by violence began taking on alarming proportions. This led many organized black sectors to form coalitions with other social causes in the nation to address the problems of displaced Afro-Colombians. Increasingly these sectors have also rallied international support,



A map of Colombia, detailing where Asher conducted research on displacement and involuntary migration.

connecting with human rights entities, churches, solidarity groups, and African-American politicians (especially the Congressional Black Caucus).

The call for the recognition of black identity and territorial rights began being reformulated to stress the right of black communities to return to their homes and collective lands to live a life of dignity and peace. Black women are playing a key role in these new mobilizations as they were in the ones that were going on a decade ago. As displaced Afro-Colombians face new forms of discrimination and invisibility, there is a resurgence in activism against racial discrimination, and for socioeconomic and political equality, and reparations for indignities suffered in the distant past as in more recent times.

Saludos,

Kiran

For more information about the plight of Afro-Colombians, their struggles for their rights, and what you can do to engage them please visit www.afrocolombia.org, www.wola.org, and www.ciponline.org.