

Why Afro-Colombians Oppose the Colombia FTA

<http://blog.thehill.com/2008/02/07/why-afro-colombians-oppose-the-colombia-fta/>

February 7th, 2008

Marino Cordoba, founder of the Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), submitted this post as a guest blogger for The Hill.

The U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement is considered a non-starter in the U.S. Congress because the country is the world's deadliest for unionactivists. Less known, but equally disturbing is the systematic violencenow confronting Afro-Colombians.

African descendants comprise 26% of Colombia's population. As with other African descendants, we face racial discrimination which results in economic hardships far worse than those experienced by the average Colombian. However in Colombia, a vibrant 1980s civil rights movement won full recognition of our cultural rights and collective ownership andcommunity control of our territories and natural resources. The 1991 Colombian Constitution and the landmark Law 70 explicitly enshrine theserights and recognize official democratic Afro-Colombian governance structures, similar to those of your Indian tribes.

The administration of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has worked consistently to undermine our hard-won civil rights and our control of our territories. Systematic violence against our people and assassinations of our leaders continue unabated to this day.

At the end of 2007, angered by the strong opposition of the majority of Afro-Colombian communities to the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA,) Uribe created a new Commission in Colombia that directly challenges our legal governance structure.

Cynically dubbed the Commission for the Advancement of Afro-Colombian People, it would undermine our communities' ability to advance development strategies chosen by our people that comport with our needs and that help even the economic playing field.

Obviously, our official governance structure and our grassroots organizations oppose this new Commission. Despite this, President GeorgeBush and other U.S. Uribe allies, such as Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), andthe vast array of lobbying firms hired by the Uribe government are nowtrying to tout this outrageous Commission as evidence that Afro-Colombian concerns are being addressed as they push to pass the FTA.

Don't be fooled. President Uribe, the Bush Administration and Congressman Meeks may not like what authentic Afro-Colombian representatives are saying, but our legitimate governing bodies vigorously oppose the FTA, as well as other efforts by Uribe to impose natural resource exploitation projects in our territories without our consent.

Because the Colombian law is on our side, wealthy interests have

employed illegal means to physically remove us. Joint operations between the Colombian military and illegal terrorist paramilitary organizations like the "Operation Genesis" in the Afro-Colombian Chocó region have targeted our leaders with assassinations while the Colombian military has aerielly bombarded our communities.

Tens of thousands of us have been forced to flee. These attacks clear the way for the entry of oil palm plantations, logging operations, and mining projects advanced by allies of the Uribe Administration.

Colombia has more than 3 million internally displaced people. This kind of forced displacement is now occurring in port communities and other regions supporters of the FTA seek to develop. None of our lands have been returned to our control.

Accompanying these physical attacks has been a legal assault aimed at formalizing the theft of our land. The Uribe government passed new Forestry and Rural Development Laws and has amended the Mining Law to extinguish our rights and empower oil palm, logging and other companies that have utilized the services of paramilitaries to occupy our territories.

Our communities have vehemently opposed these laws as unconstitutional. Recently the Colombian Supreme Court ruled against the Forestry Law, which would have removed our control of the forests on our land. Our Supreme Court ruled that under international and Colombian law, the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities that strongly opposed the law should have been consulted * which they were not.

The Colombia FTA is the same situation. It is a proposal that our communities oppose, about which our traditional authorities were not consulted, and which would lock in the paramilitary-financiers control of our land. Specifically, the FTA's expansive foreign investor rights would empower multinational corporations investing in these projects with protections that would make restoration of our lands extremely difficult, even when we win in our courts.

Recognizing our opposition, Uribe and his allies devised this new Commission, which is stacked with Uribe supporters and individuals known to support the FTA, to feign "consultation" with Afro-Colombian communities and issue a determination that the FTA is good for us despite our communities' contrary conclusions.

Rather than a positive development, this new Commission is a sophisticated ploy to undermine Afro-Colombian rights and is a part of a broader strategy to elevate unrepresentative and illegitimate pro-FTA individuals against the stated interest of Afro-Colombian communities themselves.

Congress can help Afro-Colombians by demanding that President Uribe respect the Colombian Constitution and terminate this Commission that challenges our civil rights. And, Congress should pass House Resolution 618 sponsored by Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ) on the plight of Afro-Colombians.

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struggle to secure Colombia's progressive Law 70, which grants land rights to Afro-Colombian communities. After surviving many attempts on his life, Mr. Cordoba has been forced to live in exile in the United States.