

AfroColombians Displaced
By David Bacon
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Ana Valencia still tries to eke out a living as a miner in the hills near the headwaters of Colombia's Rio Salvajina. Her sisters are gone now to the nearest city of Cali, where they work as domestics. She's having a hard time hanging on.

"Due to the absolute poverty in which we live," Valencia explains in Spanish, "many women have to move to the city to work. Single women have to leave their children behind with the eldest child caring for the younger siblings. They can't afford to send all of their children to school, because you must pay for tuition and their uniform and there isn't enough money to go around. So they come home every two weeks to leave more food for the children and return to the city again. That is their only option."

Living on the mountain is even harder. In this AfroColombian community, Palo Blanco, the men farm and take care of animals, while the women mine gold. "We do everything here, even a man's job," says Valencia. "My mother's a miner too. She's 77 years old, and she's been mining since she was 15. She's still out there right now."

As hard as mining and farming are, however, people like Valencia are fighting to stay. Today, though, the threat to Palo Blanco's existence doesn't come only from poverty. The Anglo American Corporation plans to pulverize the mountain where Valencia and her community mine and extract the gold using industrial methods that will leave behind huge piles of tailings and pits filled with cyanide residue. If the project is allowed to proceed, Palo Blanco residents will lose their small diggings and the income they gain from them. Pollution will make it even harder to farm. The town might become just a memory.

"Development" projects like this one are backed by the Colombian government and pushed by the United States and international financial institutions. Later this spring the U.S. Congress is expected to debate a free trade treaty that President George Bush has already signed with Colombia. Like all such agreements, it will create more favorable investment conditions for US corporations and banks, by removing legal protections for the land inhabited by AfroColombian and indigenous communities, cutting the public budget for social services, and privatizing public enterprises like electricity. The North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico, for instance, allowed subsidized US corn producers to flood the Mexican market, making it impossible for many small farmers to compete. Colombian workers and farmers fear these measures will lead to a huge loss of jobs, and to driving farmers from their land.

All of this will lead to more displacement of rural

AfroColombian and indigenous communities including Valencia, who asked to have her name changed for fear of reprisal. Leaders who stand in the way of foreign investment projects will disappear or die. While most displaced Colombians become internal migrants in the country's growing urban slums, that migratory stream will eventually cross borders into those wealthy countries whose policies have set it into motion. Since 2002, more than 200,000 Colombians have arrived in the U.S.

Valencia and her neighbors are defending their land in the hills of the Cauca department, and not just because it's the source of their economic survival. It is also part of the historical territory of AfroColombians. Development projects like the one led by the Anglo American Corp. threaten more than just a group of families or a single town. They endanger the territorial basis for maintaining the AfroColombian culture and social structure that has developed over 500 years.

In Colombia, Africans fled the plantations established by the Spanish colonizers in the early 1500s in huge numbers, traveling south and west to the Pacific coast and the jungle-clad mountains inland. They called their runaway towns palenques. By the time Simon Bolivar and Francisco de Paula Santander raised the flag of liberation from Spain in 1810, slaves and former slaves made up three of every five soldiers in the anti-colonial army. Yet emancipation was delayed another forty years until 1851. By then, the rural AfroColombian communities founded by escaped slaves were as old as the great Colombian cities of Bogotá or Cartagena.

Today Colombia, a country of 44 million people, is the third largest in Latin America, and one of the most economically polarized. Luis Gilberto Murillo Urrutia, the former governor of Choco state, says AfroColombians make up close to 40 percent of Colombia's people, although the government says it's only 26 percent (or about 11 million people). While non-Black Colombians have an annual income of \$1,500, AfroColombian families make \$500, and only 38 percent of AfroColombian young people go to high school compared to 66 percent of non-Black Colombians.

Institutionalized racism has been reinforced by decades of internal displacement due to economic pressures and an internal civil war. From 1940 to 1990, the urban percentage of Colombia's population grew from 31 to 77 percent. AfroColombians joined this internal migration in hopes of gaining a better standard of living. Those hopes were dashed, and instead, Murillo says, "they joined the ranks of the urban poor, living in the marginal areas of big cities such as Cali, Medellín, and Bogotá. Currently, most AfroColombians are living in urban areas. Only 25 percent, approximately three million people, are still based on the land." Those who remain in rural areas also find themselves caught in the country's deadly civil war between government forces, insurgents and

rightwing paramilitaries (who are politically linked to Colombia's conservative politicians, including President Alvaro Uribe.).

In 1991, AfroColombian and indigenous communities insisted that the country's rewritten constitution recognize their right to their historical territories. Law 70, passed in 1993, said these communities had to give their approval prior to any new projects planned on their land. Having a law is one thing, however. Enforcing it is another.

Many families in Palo Blanco have already been displaced by a series of hydroelectric projects, starting in 1984, when 3,600 people were uprooted by the construction of the dam on the Rio Salvajina, a project by the Spanish power giant, Union Fenosa. Behind it, water flooded schools, homes, churches, even cemeteries. Community leaders who resisted the removal were killed or disappeared.

"The company didn't kill people directly," says community activist Esperanza Rivas, who asked that her name be changed. "It asked the state, through the army, to force people to leave so they could run their business."

By 2001, however, silt had begun to build up behind the Rio Salvajina dam. Power generation, and therefore Union Fenosa's income, dropped. So the company proposed a new megaproject, to divert the Rio Ovejas from its course in the next valley, through a tunnel into the Rio Salvajina reservoir. Knowing families couldn't survive the loss of their river, local communities got organized and refused to consent.

The Colombian government is now under pressure to respect international human rights and so it turned to the rightwing paramilitaries. Rivas says that's when she began seeing bodies thrown into the river in front of her house.

"Leaders began to disappear," she recalls. "There were massacres, not just of people living in the area, but even those who'd fled to other places. Their bodies were dumped here. People were very frightened. And after the paramilitaries arrived and the resistance was weakened, [the company] came back with the proposal again."

Local communities do not control these large development projects-regardless of what the constitution dictates. Power and gold sales create dividends, but the only Colombians who benefit from them are a tiny handful of brokers in Bogotá. But the Colombian government, like many in thrall to market-driven policies, sees foreign investment in these projects as the key to economic development, and thus revenue. It cuts the budget for public services needed by AfroColombian, indigenous and other poor communities, while increasing military spending. The US military aid program, Plan Colombia, underwrites much of that Colombian military budget.

In response, AfroColombians have built a grassroots organization, the Proceso de la Comunidad Negra, or the Black Community Process. Some of its leaders have traveled to Washington DC to denounce the project in

meetings with U.S. Congress members, trying to convince them to vote no on the proposed free trade agreement.

Whether or not the treaty is ratified, the AfroColombian community is organizing to resist. In a 2000 confrontation with the paramilitaries, Valencia explains, "we all gathered together to put up a fight. We confronted the paras [paramilitaries] at this road, where they had bound a community member and were going to kill him. When we began to question them, they let him go. We saw that once we all united, we were stronger and lost our fear. When they came around again to beat us, we were ready to stand up for ourselves."