

**Report to the AAA Committee for Human Rights
The Awá of Southern Colombia: a “Perfect Storm” of Violence¹**

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A crisis of violence is afflicting an indigenous people, the Awá, in the department of Nariño in southwestern Colombia.² The perpetrators, multiple and diverse, include right-wing paramilitaries, leftist guerrillas, and the Colombian army, their attacks abetted by an indifferent national government, appalling accumulations of anti-personnel mines, and an aerial fumigation program to eradicate illegal coca plantations. The result has been shockingly large numbers of human rights abuses, massive forced internal displacement, widespread hunger, and breakdown of educational, health, and Awá cultural institutions. Another indigenous group, the Eperara Siapidara, who live closer to the Pacific Ocean, has also suffered from the violence, as have neighboring Afro-Colombian communities and poor small-scale farmers (*campesinos*).

International attention focused on the Awá following a massacre on February fourth of at least eight and as many as twenty-seven Awá living in the Tortugaña-Telembi resguardo³ in the Barbacoas municipality, which was carried out by the larger of the two guerrilla groups, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia⁴). Several news sources reported that seventeen Awá were “disappeared” on that day and an additional ten were killed two days later. The FARC subsequently claimed responsibility for eight of the killings,⁵ accusing the victims of informing for the army. In the aftermath, the FARC forbade any Awá from touching the bodies or giving information about what had happened, on pain of death,⁶ and no more information was forthcoming until the bodies were found a month and a half later. As it turned out, the victims, two of whom were young pregnant women, had been tortured before they were executed.

¹ This report is based on documents from Colombian government agencies, Colombian universities, and several non-governmental organizations, both Colombian and international: Etnias de Colombia (<http://www.etniasdecolombia.org/actualidadetnica/graficos.asp#>), CODHES (Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento, <http://www.codhes.org/>), U.S. Office on Colombia (www.wola.org), and Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA, <http://www.coha.org/>). Thanks to the following interviewees for giving so generously of their time: Jesús Piñacué (Senado), Jorge Betancurt (Alianza Social Indígena), Andrés Betancurt (Governor of Jambaló, Cauca), Mauricio Chilatra (Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia, ONIC), Jairo Gutiérrez (ONIC), Luz Carolina Pulido (Asesora, UNIPA), Horacio Guerrero (Defensoría del Pueblo, [Human Rights Ombudsman], Office for indigenous groups and ethnic minorities), and Ricardo Medina (Procuraduría de la Nación, Office of Prevention in Matters of Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities). Thanks also to Luís Francisco Bustamante (Asociación para la Promoción Social Alternativa Minga), Esther Sánchez, Myriam Jimeno, María Clemencia Ramírez, and James Howe for their help.

² A department is equivalent to a U.S. state. Nariño is made up of 64 municipalities, contains 30,265 square kilometers, and has 1,541,956 residents, 10.6% of whom are indigenous living in 67 resguardos (collectively owned territories) (nasaacin.org/noticias, consulted April 27, 2009).

³ Collectively owned indigenous territory. Nariño Awa live in thirty-nine *resguardos*.

⁴ The other guerrilla group, ELN (Army of National Liberation), also operates in Nariño, but reliable information about its activities is scarce. See <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/02/11/colombia.indians>

⁵ FARC says it killed 8 Indian informants. Frank Bajak, *Miami Herald* Feb. 18, 2009.

⁶ <http://www.nasaacin.org/noticias.htm?x=9785>, accessed April 27, 2009.

One of the saddest features of this story is that the massacre was completely predictable—a magazine article calls it “a massacre foretold,”⁷ after novelist Gabriel García Márquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Its antecedents illustrate many of the problems that Colombia’s indigenous nations, or “*pueblos*,”⁸ face.⁹ The FARC, which concentrates operations in rural areas, currently has 9,000-12,000 combatants.¹⁰ At the beginning of 2008, when the army began a series of anti-guerrilla campaigns, not only were soldiers assigned positions very near Awá communities, some went so far as to sleep in their houses, despite repeated denunciations of the practice to authorities, and as a result these Awá were targeted by the guerrillas. Awá leaders had already requested United Nations help in temporarily transferring members of the communities at risk out of the zones of conflict, but the government of President Alvaro Uribe did not respond. On January 8 the Nariño governor’s office issued a warning that these communities were in grave danger, but again there was no response from the administration.

Background

The overall situation of Colombia’s indigenous population has worsened in recent years.¹¹ On January 26, 2009 the Constitutional Court issued Act 004, ruling that forcibly displaced indigenous people could not be treated in the same manner as the general population; their cultural distinctiveness had to be taken into account. The Court warned that thirty-two pueblos were at risk of disappearing, and that eighteen local communities were at grave and immediate risk of disappearing, both physically and culturally. The ruling reminded the Colombian state of its obligation to counter the causes of forced displacement, and ordered the state to design and implement a program of guarantees specifically aimed at aiding the country’s indigenous peoples. Working with some of the affected communities, the Court formulated individual survival plans and ordered the government to implement them, in full consultation with the respective pueblos.

Apart from a few Awá in the neighboring department of Putumayo to the east, most live in Nariño Department,¹² which until recently was relatively peaceful, especially when compared to the horrific violence experienced by many other areas of the country

⁷ See [Semana.com](http://www.semana.com), Friday 13, February 2009.

⁸ A Spanish word meaning both “community” and “people.”

⁹ One source states that 150 Awá have been killed in the last seven years. Unipa y Onic denuncian Masacre de las Farc contra el Pueblo Awá, Feb. 11, 2009. <http://nasaacin.org/noticias.htm?x=9528>, accessed April 27, 2009.

¹⁰ <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/02/11/colombia.indians/index.html>. Accessed Feb. 10, 2009.

¹¹ See Jean Jackson, “Update on the Crisis in Colombia” AAA Committee on Human Rights Task Force on Plan Colombia: <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/cfhr/index.htm> (2005). “Colombia’s indigenous peoples confront the armed conflict.” In Cristina Rojas, Judy Meltzer, eds., 2005, *Elusive Peace: International, National, and Local Dimensions of Conflict in Colombia*. Palgrave/Macmillan: 185-208. “Plan Colombia and the Andean Initiative: Counter-terrorism or State Terrorism?” *Swords and Ploughshares*: Bulletin of the Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security, University of Illinois Vol. XV Number 1, Summer 2003: 16-19. “La crisis en Colombia: Consecuencias para los pueblos indígenas.” In Alvaro Camacho, ed., 2003, *El conflicto colombiano y su impacto en los países Andinos*. Bogotá: Centro de Estudios Socioculturales e Internacionales, Ediciones Uniandes: 133-164. “Caught in the Crossfire: Colombia’s indigenous peoples during the 1990s.” In David Maybury-Lewis, ed., 2002, *Identities in Conflict: Indigenous peoples and Latin American States*, Harvard University Press: 107-134. Also see *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Winter 2003, entire issue on “Indigenous responses to Plan Colombia.”

¹² Awá also live in Ecuador.

during the past half-century. In the 1990s small numbers of FARC combatants entered Nariño, but the Awá, who number 15,364,¹³ continued to live in relative tranquility, cultivating staples like manioc (also known as yuca or cassava), plantains and corn, and hunting, fishing, and foraging in the mountainous forests surrounding their small communities. In 2004, however, the situation sharply deteriorated, with bombing raids targeting the illegal groups carried out by the military, which produced the first large internal displacement of the civilian population in Nariño. According to ONIC (Colombian National Indigenous Organization), during the last ten years there have been five massive internal displacements of Awá, four massacres and approximately two hundred assassinations.¹⁴ At present the department leads Colombia in the number of internally displaced residents.

The changes that led to the current spate of disappearances, extra-judicial executions, fierce battles between the army and the FARC near Awá communities, and the massive population displacements have their origins in policies established far away—in Bogotá, in the U.S. Congress, and in the international bodies coveting Nariño's natural resources. National and international efforts to end the trafficking in cocaine also play a major role. "Plan Colombia," a U.S. funded program initiated by President Bill Clinton and Colombian President Andrés Pastrana in 1999, initially targeted the large-scale illegal cultivation of coca in Putumayo and Caquetá, Nariño's neighbors to the east. Although its efforts included crop substitution and voluntary manual eradication projects, most funds went to military projects aimed at eradicating coca cultivation through aerial fumigation, and at equipping ground forces in the region and defending the anti-insurrectionary forces. Dramatic coverage in local and national TV news programs of the capture and destruction of narcotraffickers' coca-processing laboratories deep in the jungle convinced many Colombians that the government's campaign of Democratic Security Strategy (*Seguridad Democrática*) was making headway.

Such campaigns were nothing new: marijuana and opium poppies as well as coca had been cultivated elsewhere in the country since the 1970s, inspiring similar eradication efforts. Their success is debatable. There is no doubt that several regions—for example, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the north, Guaviare in the eastern plains, and the Amazonian departments of Vaupés, Amazonas, Putumayo and Caquetá—now produce less illegal drugs than previously and that many urban areas in these regions are safer than before. When pressure builds in one place, however, narcotraffickers move elsewhere, and the most recent military build-up in Putumayo and Caquetá made the move to Nariño almost inevitable. Although Nariño is much more mountainous than Amazonia, the distance to the coast is far shorter in Nariño than in Putumayo or Caquetá.

The rural populations of these southern tropical regions—indigenous pueblos, Afro-Colombians, and the campesinos who came in waves of migration facilitated by government programs to ease land scarcity in highland areas—more than marginalized,

¹³ Lorena Díaz Caviendes, Los Awá: Gente de la montaña, de la selva. Equipo de Comunicaciones CINEP, www.cinep.org.co. Other sources give 20,000 and 21,000 (Probe urged in Indians' slayings. Chris Kraul, *Los Angeles Times* Feb. 16, 2009; FARC says it killed 8 Indian informants. Frank Bajak, *Miami Herald* Feb. 18, 2009).

¹⁴ Unipa y Onic denuncian masacre de las Farc contra el Pueblo Awá. <http://www.onic.org.co/actualidad.shtml?x=35747>, accessed April 27, 2009.

have felt invisible. Over and over in conversations about the situation one hears that they have been “abandoned by the state,” “absence of state presence.” Worse, when large-scale coca cultivation arrived in the 1980s, these people became suspect in the eyes of the government. Seen as little better than petty criminals unable to resist the temptations of easy money, they were denied the right to have rights.¹⁵ What actually happened, the real story of coca cultivation in these regions, is not so simple, as has been amply documented by scholars and journalists.

First of all, growing coca for on-site consumption is legal in some pueblos—it is the traditional authorities who decide whether to permit it. The 1991 Constitution and certain subsequent legislation grant significant authority to the nation’s pueblos with respect to self-determination, autonomy, and self-government. In many pueblos coca has been a medicinal and sacred plant for centuries. Coca, it should be emphasized, is not cocaine; the plant is legally grown in other South American countries. Up-scale hotels, for instance, especially in Peru and Bolivia, serve coca tea to newly arrived international guests. Unprocessed coca does not provide a “high”; rather, it diminishes unpleasant feelings resulting from fatigue, cold, and hunger. In the pueblos that permit coca cultivation for local consumption, sale to outsider narcotraffickers is prohibited, as is any coca-processing into coca paste, (*basuco*), the raw material for cocaine. However, in some communities, some individuals cannot resist the temptation to sell to outsiders, and in others heavily armed criminals coerce people into growing the crop.

As has happened elsewhere in Colombia, the government’s fumigation campaign in Nariño pushes coca growers to clear virgin forest and plant new fields, causing an environmental nightmare. Narcotraffickers, moreover, have recently changed their processing technology, substituting small “kitchens” (*cocinas*), which process much smaller amounts of coca paste, for the large laboratories located deep in the forest. Although this new technology means that traffickers depend on many more producers, *cocinas* have the advantage of being easily disassembled and reassembled elsewhere.

Another complication follows from the variety of narcotraffickers. Some are simply criminals with no political agenda, but the FARC is deeply involved in the coca trade, as are the paramilitary groups. Colombia’s “Justice and Peace” law of 2005 was intended to demobilize the paramilitary forces that have wreaked so much havoc since the early 1990s, and to develop programs to re-insert their fighters into civil society. But in Nariño, according to one source, paramilitary demobilization failed, and three thousand men make up what are called “emerging bands” (newly formed or re-mobilized) who sport names like “Black Eagles,” “*Rastrojos*” (“Weeds”), and “*Nueva Generación*” (“New Generation”).¹⁶

Poverty and lack of alternatives also influence decisions to grow coca. The level of poverty in Nariño is 64%, and the department produces 22.5% of the coca grown in the

¹⁵ See Dagnino, Evelina, 1998. Culture, citizenship, and democracy: changing discourses and practices of the Latin American Left. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview: 33-63. Also see María Clemencia Ramírez, *Between the State and the Guerrillas: Identity and Citizenship in the Cocalero Movement in the Putumayo*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Information from Xabier Hernández, consultant to the Office of Nariño Government, in CINEP’s report How to protect indigenous communities in zones of conflict? (unpublished). See www.cinep.org.co.

country.¹⁷ Although large-scale illegal coca cultivation and attempts to stamp it out create the most serious problems for the Awá, Nariño's location, on the coast and bordering Ecuador, also plays a role: it is geopolitically strategic, and its natural resources, among them minerals, oil, and fertile soils, attract actors with economic interests. Various mega-projects, most particularly large-scale cultivation of palm oil for biofuel, have harmed the department's poor rural population by forcing them off their land.

In short, Nariño is contested territory, and while only some of the combatants have political agendas, all have economic ones. Moreover, though all combatants must negotiate the rugged terrain, the army enjoys the advantage of operating openly. Some Awá claim that during the last two years the official forces have committed the vast majority of human rights abuses.¹⁸ Links between paramilitaries and the army have been clearly exposed in many other regions of the country, leading to several high-profile prosecutions. What the connections might be in Nariño is not at all clear. What is clear is that one of the two Awá organizations, UNIPA (Awá People's Indigenous Unity) has been the target of threats sent by telephone and electronic mail, and several of its leaders have been assassinated. UNIPA officers' requests for protection from the local district attorney's office were not answered.

Colombia's pueblos¹⁹ have taken a position of neutrality with respect to the conflict—"because all armed actors kill," and because "this conflict is not ours."²⁰ Earlier, combatants in Nariño for the most part accepted this position, but now none of them will even grant its possibility. Indeed, the Awá, because of their neutral position are not only caught in the crossfire, they are considered suspect by all combatants, accused of being on the side of "the enemy." An open letter of March 7 written by ACIN (Indigenous Association of Northern Cauca) and CRIC (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca), accompanied by 155,000 signatures of "Colombians for Peace," addressed to Alfonso Cano, commander of FARC, states the pueblos' position succinctly: "we have told you that we are not external to the conflict, we are inside it as victims, and we want to be inside as actors that help resolve it. But we do not wish to be an armed group, nor do we want our members to be combatants in any army."²¹ Many Colombian pueblos have suffered greatly as a result of their refusal to take up arms. Leaders are particularly vulnerable: thirteen Awá leaders have been disappeared since 2001.²²

Although the causes of the horrific situation in Nariño repeat those of other regions, a few features particular to the Awá exacerbate their suffering. First, relative to the size of the Awá population, the degree of forced displacement has been massive. Second, in their remote territories, Awá had until recently very little experience with strangers of any kind and certainly had no institutional mechanisms to deal with today's threats—

¹⁷ Xabier Hernández supplied these figures for CINEP's Report following the March 12 meeting. See www.cinep.org.co.

¹⁸ "Frontera del Olvido" ("Frontier of Forgetting"), film made by the Awá and ONIC, 2007, with funding from the European Union.

¹⁹ The government recognizes 87 pueblos; ONIC recognizes 102.

²⁰ They refuse to be drawn into "a social and armed conflict that we do not share nor support, which is not ours, and in which we do not participate directly or indirectly" Unipa y Onic denuncian masacre de la FARC contra el pueblo Awá. Feb. 11, 2009. <http://www.onic.org.co/actualidad.shtml?x=35747>. Accessed April 27, 2009.

²¹ Carta a las Farc sobre Masacre de Indigenas Awá e Indigenas en el Conflicto. ACIN March 7, 2009.

²² "Frontera del Olvido"

armed men intimidating them, stealing or paying next to nothing for their animals, fruits and staple foods, and killing their leaders (or, as in the February atrocity, entire families). Organizing Awá communities for any purpose is a challenge: this is a region where getting produce out to a market (or carrying a sick family member to a clinic) involves walking long distances over rugged terrain—not even pack animals can manage the trails. Third, the influx of foreigners exposed Awá to diseases against which they had little or no immunity. Fourth, Awá are accustomed to small dispersed settlements, making the experience of living at close quarters in displacement centers so intolerable for some families that they leave, and officials at the centers often have no idea where they have gone. Fifth, Nariño contains more anti-personnel mines (mainly set by the FARC) than anywhere else in the country, rendering those Awá still living in their own settlements virtual prisoners. According to two ONIC interviewees, mines have killed approximately twenty Awá and disabled many others.²³ Because the mines are home-made, they are hard to defuse: some are detonated with cell phones, some with camera flashbulbs, some from being stepped on.

Sixth, contrary to government denials, army operations that seek to control traffic into and out of Awá territories further hem them in, as in some cases does the FARC. Seventh, the army's intensive monitoring of the movement of food and medicine often leads them to turn back shipments they suspect are destined for the FARC. According to one interviewee the army wants to control even who talks to whom. Eighth, more than many pueblos, Awá depend for their livelihood on hunting, fishing and foraging, but armed combatants and the mines make these activities extremely risky, especially at night, when Awá custom is to fish. The army prohibits nighttime activities, saying they will shoot first and answer questions later. Because Awá gardens often lie at some distance from the settlements, they build huts near them to stay for a few days at a time, but the police now destroy these huts on the suspicion that they belong to the guerrillas. Ninth, in addition to hunger from greatly reduced fishing, hunting, and foraging, Awá must contend with glyphosate, the chemical used in aerial fumigation. Colombia is the only country that permits aerial spraying of this product. In 2004, 32,000 hectares were fumigated in Nariño, and in 2006 the number rose to 60,000. Spraying often ruins food crops, which are more susceptible to glyphosate than are coca bushes. Glyphosate also depletes food for birds and other game, and pollutes the streams that provide aquatic food sources and drinking water. Although the manufacturer, Monsanto, claims that glyphosate (brand name: Roundup) is safe for use around humans, it has in fact caused health problems like skin diseases and vomiting and diarrhea, especially in children. Not surprisingly, the Awá, particularly infants and children, are facing a grave malnutrition problem. After death and mutilation from the anti-personnel mines and assassinations and torture, Awá suffer most from malnutrition.

Responses

As the Awá are bi-national and can cross the border freely, some families have sought refuge in Ecuador. Wherever they go, however, they impose a heavy burden on the families and settlements that take them in. Even under the best of conditions, a subsistence economy can be stretched only so far to accommodate visiting relatives. For

²³ According to Helene Verney, spokeswoman for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, from 2006 on, Nariño has led Colombia in internally displaced persons, comprising about 10% of the 300,000 people who became IDPs in 2008 (Probe urged in Indians' slayings, Chris Kraul, *Los Angeles Times* Feb. 16, 2009).

the Awá, moreover, their ancestral lands constitute their *raison d'être*, the foundation of their culture and identity, and relocation causes a profound crisis.

A number of government institutions and national and international NGOs are on the ground in Nariño, trying to help the displaced, including Acción Social, which coordinates services for internally displaced people throughout the country, the Nariño governor's office, and the Nariño Institute of Health. The Norwegian Council for Refugees has been particularly helpful, working closely with the two Awá organizations, UNIPA and CAMAWARI (Principal Awá Council of Ricaute²⁴). Various co-coordinating efforts have resulted in an interagency committee to coordinate humanitarian assistance, formed of nine United Nations agencies and thirteen international NGOs. Headquarters of the two Awá organizations have both been turned into reception centers. It is hard to count displaced Awá because numbers are constantly changing; one source says that between 2004 and 2007, 9,200 Awá have been driven from their homes.²⁵ Few of the forcibly displaced leave Nariño; most go to hastily set up refuges at administrative centers and schools. But what is offered there is not sufficient, and there are many problems. Living conditions are far from adequate, and many Awá suffer from confinement and the density of people—one interviewee described forty Awá assigned to one room. Nor are Awá women used to cooking as they now must for large numbers of people in teams of three or four. The bean and rice diet at the centers differs so significantly, moreover, from what the Awá are used to that some have fallen sick. Awá are used to sleeping in hammocks, not on beds or the floor. Finally, non-indigenous personnel in these centers complain that they cannot understand the rudimentary Spanish of many Awá, and some lament that the Awá are “not collaborating” with them.

Following the February fourth massacre, national and local indigenous organizations gave the FARC a deadline of February 23 to hand over the bodies “of the twenty-seven aborigines assassinated last February 4 and 6.” A Commission of Traditional Authorities was created to address the Awá crisis; it asked the government to set up diplomatic arrangements so that an international team of experts in de-activating mines could enter the territory and work. They could be “from Bolivia, Ecuador or Brazil,” but not members of Colombia's security forces.

Until recently Awá have sought to interact minimally with outsiders, in particular with official Colombia. But as the crisis grew, this low-profile strategy gave way to calls for help. On February 25 Awá leaders and representatives from many organizations arrived in Bogotá and spent the week visiting civil society organizations, government ministries, and the media to publicize their pueblo's plight. Public awareness of the Awá's desperate situation grew exponentially.

On March 12, 2009, a Forum asking “How to Protect Indigenous Communities in Zones of Conflict?” was held in Bogotá to discuss the situation in depth.²⁶ Representatives from numerous NGOs attended, as did representatives from several national and

²⁴ *Cabildo Mayor Awá de Ricaute*.

²⁵ “Frontera del Olvido.” Refugees International reported in July 2008 that almost 95,000 people in Nariño had been forcibly displaced. (Council on Hemispheric Affairs: <http://www.coha.org/2009/02/awa-massacre-highlights-desperate-need-for-fresh-approach-to-drugs-in-Colombia>. Accessed Feb. 25, 2009).

²⁶ Sponsored by CINEP (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular), Program for Peace and the Social Science Faculty of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. See www.cinep.org.co.

departmental government agencies. One conclusion, offered by Horacio Guerrero, head of the office for Indigenous Communities and Ethnic Minorities in the *Defensoría del Pueblo* (in essence, the Human Rights Ombudsman office), was that no comprehensive set of policies exists to ensure protection of the country's ethnic groups—and that formulating one should be a government priority. Guerrero also argued that indigenous pacific resistance to the conflict offered “the greatest contribution to the construction of a democratic and pluralist society,” but that the country has a long way to go before it reaches this goal.²⁷ The Report on the Forum lists the many constitutional articles, national laws, and international treaties signed by Colombia that protect human and indigenous rights, as well as relevant articles from the United Nations' 2008 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It noted, however, that these measures so far exist “only on paper.”

The February 23 deadline arrived, with no response from the FARC or the government. The indigenous organizations drew up plans for an investigatory commission that would travel to the region, a *Minga Humanitaria*,²⁸ to look for the cadavers. The Colombian government disapproved of plan.²⁹ In addition to indigenous leaders from many parts of Colombia, as well as from Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and several Central American countries, various non-indigenous participants accompanied the marchers, recruited from the Defensoría and various human rights organizations, as did national and international journalists. Organizers explicitly rejected an offer of a Colombian military escort,³⁰ which the Minister of Interior and Justice tried to persuade them to accept a day before departure.

The Minga left Bogotá on March 23 and arrived in Nariño on the 26th. Between four hundred and six hundred people participated, and daily reports were posted on several web sites. Eight bodies were found, and on March 31 ONIC-UNIPA declared that the Minga had complied with the mandate the traditional authorities had given it. The trip back was begun.³¹

Also on March 23, Awá leaders traveled to Washington, D.C. to testify about their situation at the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights, as part of a more general hearing on the overall situation of the nation's pueblos.

We have seen that several non-indigenous organizations focusing on human rights and aiding internally displaced persons (who number over three million in a country of forty-six million) responded to the Awá crisis. But the lack of political will at the national level, and the sluggish pace of bureaucratic machinery have meant that actions other than direct humanitarian attention have been slow and mostly ineffectual. Defensorial Resolution # 53, for example, written with the collaboration of several Awá leaders following an audience at the agency on Aug. 7, 2007, despite its urgency, was not published until June 5 of the following year and then only after considerable external pressure. This resolution details the vulnerability of the Awá and the gravity of the situation, offering a series of recommendations aimed at guaranteeing the safety of

²⁷ In CINEP's report on the forum, How to protect indigenous communities in zones of conflict? See www.cinep.org.co.

²⁸ Full name: Humanitarian Minga for Life and Dignity of the Awá People.

²⁹ Resisten los awás. ELESPECTADOR.COM, Editorial, April 13, 2009.

³⁰ Indígenas Unidos en Minga de Resistencia. ACIN Feb. 19, 2009.

³¹ <http://www.onic.org.co/actualidad.shtml?x=35865>.

this population. But the Defensoría del Pueblo can only investigate complaints and issue reports; it has no power to prosecute. Certainly, some functionaries of these agencies are deeply disturbed by the situation. Horacio Guerrero, for example, who was mentioned above, argued that the humanitarian crisis of the nation's pueblos must be addressed not only from the perspective of forced displacement, but also with respect to ongoing systematic processes that lead to the extermination and disappearance of entire pueblos.³²

Real change requires policies and actions from the highest levels of government, and despite repeated denunciations on the part of various organizations, indigenous and nonindigenous, the official response to the Awá crisis has been extremely disappointing. The Uribe government is on a collision course with Colombia's regional and national indigenous organizations. The two sides have for some time disagreed on almost everything, and the relationship worsened after sixty thousand Indians and their allies participated in a very successful march in October 2007, protesting government positions on free trade and legislation that dilutes the protections guaranteed by the Constitutional reforms of 1991. Indigenous anti-government rhetoric sharpened after Colombia abstained from voting on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. A crisis was reached on December 16, 2008, when in broad daylight at a military checkpoint in Cauca, soldiers shot and killed Edwin Legarda, husband of CRIC president Aída Quilcué.

Although the government says it is taking action, its response, to quote one interviewee, is to "militarize, militarize, militarize." Uribe's sole reaction to the massacres was to state that his government "must reinforce its anti-terrorist policies."³³ Indigenous leaders have been very clear that the presence of military forces in the region, "rather than serve as a mechanism of protection, turns into a mechanism that brings permanent threat."³⁴ Policy makers do not seem to comprehend or even to care that these military buildups inevitably put local indigenous people (and others) in grave jeopardy. Particularly worrisome is the tactic of offering remuneration to civilians who assist military operations, which turns them into targets of the guerrillas. Among the many precedents elsewhere in the country that illustrate the seriousness of this threat, perhaps the most telling is what happened in neighboring Putumayo, whose greatly increased militarization was funded by Plan Colombia. The result of these stepped-up operations was all-out war in some places, as well as guerrilla and paramilitary road blocks, extortion, increased forced recruitment, extra-judicial executions, army reprisals, and confiscation of food and medicine on the grounds that it was intended for the insurgents. In Putumayo, just as is now happening in Nariño, massive displacements occurred, as well as the extinction or near-extinction of several extremely vulnerable Amazonian indigenous populations.

The situation of the Awá and many other vulnerable remote rural populations in Colombia is an inconvenient truth. Only when the inconvenience grows to monstrous proportions is the official gaze directed toward the periphery. Although NGO and

³² See CINEP report, *Cómo proteger comunidades indígenas en territorios en conflicto?*

³³ <http://www.coha.org/2009/02/awa-massacre-highlights-desperate-need-for-fresh-approach-to-drugs-in-Colombia>. Accessed Feb. 25, 2009.

³⁴ La masacre contra el pueblo Awá: un atentado contra la población civil y los territorios indígenas. ACIN March 5, 2009. <http://nasaacin.org/noticias.htm?x=9614>. Accessed April 27, 2009.

government relief services get set up, as we have seen, most government effort up until now has focused on beefing up the security apparatus. And so Awá continue to die, killed by the mines or by armed combatants.

Colombia is a fascinating, paradoxical, and tragic country, the site of hundreds of experiments building and destroying democracy. The nature of the experiments has evolved, of course—Colombia's conflict differs from the form it took in, say, 1990. Colombian pueblos have evolved, as well. But unfortunately some things remain constant, among them the marginalization and invisibilization of poor rural populations, as well as a failure of the military and police to observe even the most basic rights granted by the numerous international conventions and treaties that Colombia has signed, or even the terms of the ground-breaking 1991 Constitution itself. Another constant is the persistence of insurgency, despite nearly fifty years of attempts to end it. Also unchanged is the incredible toll on the civilian population, which has been tortured, disappeared, kidnapped, and massacred. In the chronic and seemingly unstopable crossfire between armed forces, entire communities risk destruction. President Uribe can take credit for safer urban streets in some sections of the country, but in the remote countryside the risks have only increased.

For further information:

www.unipa.org.co

www.nasaacin.org.co

www.onic.org.co

www.cinep.org.co

<http://www.defensoria.org.co/red/anexos/pdf/02/res/defensorial/defensorial53.pdf>

http://www.unipa.org.co/contenido/plan_de_vida.htm