

El Chocó, Colombia— Imminent Cultural, Social and Environmental Destruction

—Steve Cagan, Cleveland Hts, OH--July, 2005

The department of El Chocó in Colombia is under tremendous military, social, economic and environmental threat. This area of traditional Afro-Colombian and indigenous cultures and environmental wealth is isolated and little known in Colombia and in the rest of the world. But the pressures on the area are so great that it is no exaggeration to say that unless there is a dramatic change, both the rich forest and the traditional cultures will soon be destroyed.

Background

El Chocó is a department (province or state) of Colombia. Located in the northwest of the country, it borders Panama and has coasts on both the Caribbean and the Pacific. The Department is about halfway between the states of Maryland and West Virginia in size. Most of El Chocó is low-lying tropical rain forest (it's one of the rainiest spots in the world), though in the south and east it starts to rise into mountains. The department is crossed by two great rivers, the Atrato and the San Juan, and literally hundreds of tributaries. It is a natural paradise, home to a huge diversity of plant and animal species.

Starting in the 16th Century, the Spanish conquistadors came up the Río Atrato, one of the principal rivers of Chocó, bringing with them African slaves, in a successful search for gold. At one point, they were driven from the territory by an uprising of indigenous peoples, but eventually they returned with a superior military force, and stayed.



The indigenous communities along the shores of the major rivers and their tributaries were pushed back into the forest, first by the Spanish, and later by the communities of liberated Afro-Colombians. El Chocó was essentially ignored by the national Colombian government and society until very recently. There are almost no roads in the department, and over the centuries a river-based society developed.

Out of this experience, a unique social fabric was created. A rich local cultural tradition developed and endured, with its local foods, musical styles, celebrations and festivals, alongside the existing indigenous culture.

For a very long time the people lived poor, but not miserable. Despite government neglect and occasional inroads by foreign corporations, they maintained themselves through economic activities that included fishing, hunting, modest sustainable lumbering, small-scale panning for gold and platinum, banana cultivation, and family gardens. An active flow of cargo and people along the river provided trade and interaction among the communities. Freight boats came upriver from the ports on the coasts to trade cloth, fishhooks, salt and other goods for local products.



The People

There are various estimates of the current size of the population of El Chocó, depending on one's source, but the estimates revolve around half a million persons. Of this number, about 2/3 live in the country or isolated small villages, the rest living in the small towns and few small cities of the department. In general, whether they live in isolated houses, villages, towns or cities, the people live close to one of the rivers, and the rivers are always present in the activities and consciousness of the people.



Today, about -80-85% of the population is of African ancestry, the descendants of slaves brought by the Spanish to work in the gold mines of the area in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Another 10%, approximately, are indigenous peoples of various Embera and Waunnan ethnic groups.

This ethnic make-up is certainly distinct in Colombia, and together with the isolation of the department, it may help account for the neglect of the area.



The armed conflict

In the 1990s the traditional situation of communities living in peace and in an active relationship with their natural environment was dramatically and tragically disrupted by the arrival of the three armed groups—the FARC and ELN guerrillas, the right-wing paramilitaries, and



the government army and police. Since then, the people of Chocó have suffered the consequences of war among those groups: many deaths, displacement of thousands of people, control of the river by the armed groups, and disruption of social, cultural and economic life. The people here generally identify with none of the armed groups, but see themselves caught in the crossfire. Their demand on all three groups is to be left in peace, to be

allowed to resume their former lives, and to receive support for community-designed and -controlled development projects and social services.

In reality, guerrilla forces had been present in the territory for some time, but their presence was not very disruptive to normal social and economic life. Tourists from Medellín and other areas of Colombia who came to Chocó to vacation bathing in the famous crystalline streams and rivers would report seeing guerrilla fighters, but there were few incidents.

But in 1996 that all changed as the paramilitaries, organized originally to defend the interests of the land-owning class, entered Chocó. Although the “paras” are an illegal force, and by this time had become involved with narco-trafficking, the armed forces seem to have a cozy relationship with them in general, and a very obvious collaboration with them in Chocó.



The goals of the “paras” were quite clear from the beginning: to clear the people out of the department to make way for agricultural and infrastructure “mega-projects,” and to secure the area because of its military and economic strategic importance. Despite the loss

of any strong connection to the population on the part of the guerrilla forces, it’s clear that objectively the guerrilla resistance to the paramilitaries and the armed forces have prevented them from displacing the entire population and destroying the forest and river environments to this point.

The consequences of the violence among what the population identifies as “the three armed groups”—the military, the guerillas and the paramilitaries—have been very serious for the people of the area. Many people have been killed, kidnapped or seriously injured. Many more have been forced to flee their homes; sometimes as a result of direct threats to their lives, sometimes because the violence left them no other choice.



The main rivers, which people depend on for transport, commerce, social intercourse and fishing, have been partially, and in some areas totally, closed to the people, or have become areas of high peril. The people in the villages point out that not only have they faced death, injury and displacement, but that their economic lives and the social fabric of their community have been severely damaged by the ongoing violence.

The situation of Chocó was brought to national and international attention by the worst single incident, a massacre in the town of Bellavista, in May, 2002, an explosive device launched by the FARC at a group of paramilitaries accidentally fell into the church, where many civilians had sought refuge, killing 119 and wounding scores more.

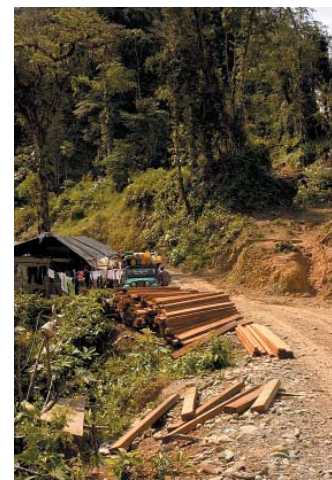
In 2005, there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of “paras” and armed forces personnel, especially in the Middle and Lower Atrato River areas. Whether because they are afraid of renewed fighting near and in their villages, or because of direct threats, many people have abandoned their villages and are living as displaced people in some of the larger centers. The military claims that they were called into the area by the communal organizations of the population; the organizations roundly deny that they did so.

Destruction of the people and their territory

Behind the immediate military conflicts lie the dangers to Chocó posed by a series of “mega-projects” proposed by multinational corporations. The activities of the paramilitaries and the armed forces seem to be aimed at protecting and expanding several significant economic activities and “mega-projects.” All these projects would severely damage—or destroy—this incredibly rich yet vulnerable environment, destroying traditional cultural and social arrangements highly valued by the people, and driving many people off the land as economic refugees. Local people are aware of these dangers, and successfully resisted an attempt by a French firm to create plantations in swamps that lie beside the lower reaches of the Atrato—they knew such plantations would have destroyed the spawning areas of river fish they depend upon.

Among the threats to the forest are:

- Major agro-industrial projects. The biggest threat so far has been the development of plantations of African palm, or oil palm. In the Lower Atrato region, these projects—which ultimately call for the conversion of tens of thousands of hectares of forest—are well underway. The planting that has been done so far has resulted in the destruction of substantial areas of forest, and the displacement of local small farmers through purchase, intimidation and violence.
- Accelerated cutting of tropical hardwood trees. Although people in the villages have always cut small numbers of trees to build their



houses and for small-scale trade along the river, the pressure on the forest has increased considerably. In the Middle Atrato, lumbering contractors have given chain saws away. In the areas accessible by road, lumbering camps have sprung up, and the area is being stripped of many trees, without the reforestation required by law.



This lumbering directly threatens the forest, and any threat to the forest also represents a threat to the homes of the people in the towns and villages there.

- Mining by gold with backhoes. Miners cut swathes through the forest, erect dams and pools to search for gold, and leave behind them a path of destruction and contamination. Like lumbering, the mining activity produces very few jobs for local people, and the profits leave the community. And like the lumbering, the mining damages the forest and ultimately degrades the territory of the inhabitants.



- The “dry canal.” Although this project no longer seems to have much force, it is a good indicator of the willingness of those behind “economic projects” to destroy the forest. The idea was to build a major container port on both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Chocó, and connect them with railroads and high-speed highways, with an almost inconceivable potential for damage to the forest and to the social structure of the people.

- Fumigating to destroy coca plantations. The United States has sponsored and supervised fumigating coca plantations. Although this does a great deal of destruction to both wild species and crops, the coca planting just moves on to another area. Fumigating follows some-time later. This has left a path of destruction throughout northwest South America. And now fumigation has also come to Chocó.

Cultural resistance

Defense of the environment and the communities, and resistance to the war and the abuses of the armed groups has fallen on community-based organizations and confederations (ACIA and ASCOBA representing the Afro-Columbian communities, and OREWA for the Embera and Waunna), and the Catholic Church, especially the Diocese of Quibdó and the Diocese

of Istmina. A few Colombian and international organizations and NGOs lend support on a small scale.



Atratiando

Since late 2003, a sense of resistance to the war and the armed groups has been growing in Chocó. Communities talk about refusing to be displaced, and look for ways to restore the fabric of their social and economic life. This movement was given a dramatic focus in



November, 2003 when a fleet of two river ships (“lan-chas”), about half a dozen smaller rapid boats belonging to organizations and institutions (“pangas”), and a large number of wooden canoes of varying sizes (“botes”) made a five-day peace pilgrimage down the river from Quibdó. As many as 1000 local people participated in various stages of the pilgrimage, as well as small numbers of people from thirteen countries, crossing the Gulf

of Urubá, and terminating in the port town of Turbo.-

Called “Atratiando: por un buen trato en el Río Atrato” (“Traveling the Atrato: for good treatment on the Río Atrato”), this was a pilgrimage for life and peace, and an expression of solidarity. These were the first boats in seven years to traverse the entire river (the paramilitaries had blockaded the river against cargo boats between the downriver towns of Ríosucio and Murindó).



The importance of this extremely ambitious undertaking will depend on the reaction of the communities of Chocó. If the spirit of dignity, hope and resistance that was shared by the people in the caravan and in the communities endures and supports the strength of the communities to refuse to be dislocated and to take back control of their own lives, it will have been a great success. As we disembarked at one of our last stops, greeted by an enthusiastic and



emotional crowd, Msgr. Fidel Cadavid Marín, Bishop of Quibdó, asked an elderly woman how she felt. She answered, filled with joy, “Just like I did when we used to be happy!”

More than 300 people made the whole trip, and at times the caravan would reach three or four times that number as many botes and smaller boats would join for a day or two. The vast majority of the participants were Chocoanos. There were also numerous Colombians representing religious, community development, human rights and other organizations. And there were a sprinkling of people from thirteen foreign countries. I was the only North American.



The role of the United States

Unfortunately, the United States has done little to stop the terrible cycle of violence, destruction and repression in Colombia. Colombia remains one of the most violent countries in the world, with an internally displaced population that is second or third in the world every year. The human rights situation is scandalous, and Amnesty International, as well as numerous religious organizations and NGOs have provided abundant documentation of the ongoing abuses. The narcotics trade, which provides the justification for US military aid to the Colombian government, has not been defeated or even seriously affected by US-supported programs.

This situation has been supported and encouraged in a major way by US intervention, mostly through the infamous “Plan Colombia.” If we look at ten years of US assistance to Colombia (including the 2006 requests), in none of those years was the military and police portion of the aid less than 75%. And the less than 1/4 (in six of the years less than 1/5) of the total aid package that was not military went for anti-drug “social activities. In none of those years have we sent Economic Support Funds or Development Assistance funds.

US policies have only aggravated the violence, and moved coca production around from place to place. Despite claims from both the Bush administration and the Uribe government in Colombia to the contrary, “Plan Colombia” has been a disaster for the Colombian people and a failure for US policy.