

Repression and Criminalisation in Colombia, Tolima

The social cost of mega-projects

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In Colombia, when investment arrives, repression arrives also. These days we have seen this clearly in the region of Catatumbo in Colombia, where thousands of peasants have been mobilising against the destruction of their livelihoods by the army and the militarisation of the region with the excuse of “counter-insurgency” operations. The region has, incidentally, been declared a strategic region for the mining-extractive industry.

The same is happening elsewhere. Tolima, in the centre of the country, with innumerable mineral and hydro resources, is becoming an important attraction for both national and transnational capital. The problem is that in the same region there are also peasants who, generation after generation have put down their roots, and who do not want to be forced from their land to facilitate a quarry on the mountains. Not only will they have nowhere to go, because all they have ever known is working the land and they do not have the resources to go elsewhere, even if they wanted, but the problem is that they do not want to. And since these people are not giving in, then this is certainly an inconvenience. An inconvenience which the state is “solving” the same way that it has done during two centuries of republican life: with brutality.

The following are some of the cases of repression in the Tolima department, symptomatic of a situation which is becoming general all over the country:

1. Chaparral, La Marina

Ever since ISAGEN decided that they wanted to construct a hydro-electric project in Alto Ambeima, things have gotten difficult for the rural communities of La Marina. Things were never easy, since this is a zone of so-called “territorial consolidation” between the Army and the presence of the Infantry Battalion XVII “José Domingo Caicedo” which has known links to right-wing paramilitary death squads, and which has been a source of constant abuses.

The people who dwell in the district were already aware of the consequences of these projects as one has been built in San José de las Herosas and many farms were left completely dry. Therefore, as soon as they had begun to protest, the military boot was put in.

Those most affected have been from the trade union ASTRACATOL, which is affiliated with Fensuagro. On the 30 March 2011, the rural leaders Gildardo García and Héctor Orozco were killed between two military control points on the road from Chaparral to La Marina (near a place called Albania). They had been harassed for some time by the army leading up to this murder. Then came the mass arrests: during that same year Edwin Lugo Caballero and José Norbey Lugo Caballero, along with Arcesio Díaz, Aycardo Morales Guzmán, Saan Maceto Marín and Fredynel Chávez Marín, all from ASTRACATOL, were arrested. Also arrested were Alexander Guerrero Castañeda and Armando Montilla Rey, of the Community Action Committees of La Marina and La Esperanza (Río Blanco) respectively. Later the nephew of Arcesio Díaz, Enzo Fabián Díaz, would be arrested. In this state of paranoia, four local soldiers who were serving in Piedras were also arrested: Vilman Useche Pava, Wilmer Javier Pérez Parra, Isidro Alape Reyes and Jason Orlando Castañeda. Apparently the orders to kill all the guerrillas were not followed with enough zeal, and so they ended up being considered suspicious to their officers.

This farce against the agrarian union ASTRACATOL has been orchestrated with a cartel of witnesses on the payroll put forward by the prosecution and the Caicedo Battalion, who have paid, in the opinion of the peasants, the laziest of the village to denounce their peers. The set-up is so clumsy that at least five of the paid informers, who pose as demobilised guerrillas, were not

even registered as such in the Colombian Agency for Reintegration of Armed People and Groups. As such, it is demonstrated that in the south of Tolima the only law which is followed is that of the Army, which acts as judge, jury and executioner. And alas for those poor souls who oppose the supreme designs of big capital.

2. Dolores

The municipality of Dolores is right in the slopes of the East Andes range of mountains in Colombia, west of the Huila department, an area rich in water sources and with an important coffee production that sustains many small farmers and peasants who combine this crop with other fruit and vegetables. This area is privileged for agricultural production and almost anything will grow there. Recently, however, oil has been discovered in the municipality and the “development train”, as president Santos calls megamining enterprises, is on the way. While exploitation has not started, pressure against the peasantry has already started. Militarisation, generalised abuse against the population, arbitrary arrests and displacement is step 1 in setting up the conditions for foreign investment. The agrarian organisations denounce that oil exploitation will require thousands of peasants to be displaced and lose their land; others, those who stay will be affected by exploitation that will damage their capacity to grow food and will thus be ruined.

On 9 May 2013, the Colombian Army carried mass arrests against agrarian union organisers of ASTRACATOL in different villages of the municipality of Dolores, by order of the Judge of the municipality of Purificación; there the general attorney is accusing the peasants of being “aides of subversion” and of the crime of “rebellion”, linking them to the FARC-EP guerrillas, based on the testimony of the cartel of witnesses on the State’s payroll. Funnily enough, the State blames them of being aides of the Front 25th of the FARC-EP which, according to the Army has been disbanded two years ago due to heavy combat in the region. The peasants arrested, all union organisers, are Ramiro Bazurdo González, Guillermo Antonio Cano Borja, Floricel Buitrago Cangrejo, Norberto García García, Gonzalo Ernesto Pastor Mora, Constantino Mayorga García, José Guillermo Pacheco Cruz and Edilberto Mayorga García. Guillermo Antonio Cano Borja is a senior agrarian organiser who is in the executive committee of the main small farmers’ association of the country, the combative Fensuagro union, and who also is the coordinator of the Human Rights’ bureau of AS-TRACATOL. He had participated just a week (28–30 April) before his arrest in the Forum of Political Participation organised by the National University of Colombia and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as a space for “civil society participation” in the current peace negotiations between the FARC-EP and the National Government. This has been denounced as a general trend during past and present peace negotiations: that the people are asked to take part in the initiatives through their own popular organisations and then they are singled out, harassed, arrested or murdered.

On 11 May they were given house arrest. While the State was not able to prove any of the charges against them, it has managed to limit their movement, confine them to their villages and keep legally a surveillance eye on them. In the mean time, the contracts for the exploitation of oil are being prepared to lure in the almighty foreign investors.

3. Cajamarca, Anaime

In the municipality of Cajamarca, AngloGold Ashanti is lord and master. They plan a project there which they call La Colosa, the biggest gold mine in the hemisphere, and they have, for that purpose, appropriated 80% of the municipality's lands. They have the support of the army -local peasants and opponents of the unsustainable mega-mining project have been harassed, stigmatised, followed and filmed. For the moment there are no cases pending against community leaders in the Comité Campesino y Ambiental de Cajamarca (the Peasant and Environmental Committee of Cajamarca) who have mobilised against the project, but attention must be paid to this, because the campaign of criminalisation comes down strongly, and AngloGold understands this in terms of the State counter-insurgency strategies, because this is the only way they can justify the military course of action against the inhabitants of the region.

Proof of this is that on the 22 February in Ibagué an "Environmental Citizens Forum" was held (in which the disapproval of the community towards the project was evident) and the papers captured the exchange of messages between the vicepresident of sustainability of AngloGold, Rafael Hertz, and the Chief of Communications of La Colosa, Iván Malaver, in which one said "several guerrillas of Anaime have been identified amongst the public who oppose (the project)". To which the other replied "Perfectly understood". By November rumours were circulating that directors of the company had been saying the army would set up camp at AngloGold Ashanti, dispersing those "guerrillas" and "rioters" of Anaime. There is no smoke without fire.

4. Doima, Piedras.

Given that somebody has to pay the price for "progress", the yes-men of AngloGold have decided to construct several leaching pools in Doima; they are also going to construct a metallurgical plant and a dam to aid the operation of La Colosa. The problem is that the residents dared to wonder why it had to be them that paid the price for this so-called progress. Additionally, the environmental agency of the Tolima department, CORTOLIMA, ordered the suspension of these operations for failing to produce proper permits and affecting water sources. But AngloGold continues as if nothing had happened. On the 9 and 11 April, the villagers were threatened by the army who were guarding trucks belonging to the mining company. Later, on the 24 April, during a peaceful protest, they attacked members of ESMAD, and arbitrarily arrested a disabled rural dweller.

Meanwhile, the propaganda of AngloGold Ashanti can be observed on giant billboards, full of smiles and lies.

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