

The murder of a peasant leader who had opposed the mining project of La Colosa

(Cajamarca, Tolima)

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How deplorable, indeed, are the killings of Edier Otero and Ana Isabel Valencia, members of the Marcha Patriótica in Quindío, the lip-service the government is giving to its promises with the agrarian movements after the Popular Agrarian Strike, the militarisation of Caquetá and the forced displacement of the community of Pitalito in Cesar. Are these the fresh winds of peace and social dialogue which are blowing in Colombia? It is truly surprising that this oligarchy, with its mouth full of blood, does not choke when it pontificates about peace in the media.

In the afternoon of the 2 November, the peasant leader **César García**, president of the community association (*Junta de Acción Comunal*) of Cajon La Leona, was killed in cold blood by a shot to the head as he returned to his homestead with his wife and son¹. García had become visible through his participation in the Environmental and Rural Committee of Cajamarca for the defence of life, water and food (*Comité Ambiental y Campesino de Cajamarca por la Defensa de la Vida, el Agua y el Alimento*), an organisation which has been leading the community's struggle against the large-scale extractive project La Colosa. This open-cast mine has been denounced in Tolima because of the disastrous impact it would have on the community and the environment. The community of Tolima has expressed its rejection of the project through a series of massive demonstrations in defence of water and life, as well as through a popular consultation which took place in the municipality of Piedras on 28 July. On that occasion, 99.2% of the population rejected the mega-mine, with participation of approximately 60% of the electorate².

The main investor in this project is the multinational company *AngloGold Ashanti* (AGA), a company which has been broadly supported by Santos' government and is, at the moment, the company with the highest number of mining licenses – at least 410 – and which controls a territory of at least 821,000 hectares³.

Threats, stigmatisation and violence

We deeply regret this tragedy, which has taken the life of an agrarian leader, husband and father, who had not received, personally, threats of any kind. But tragedy of this kind had been predicted and in reality, in view of the ferocious campaign of stigmatisation against grass-roots organisations which have expressed opposition to the mega-project (the most expansive of its kind in the hemisphere), one could say it is a miracle that we have not had to lament a killing such as this before.

A campaign of rumours has been developing for months against the community which has organised in defence of agriculture and the environment. In November it was being said that officials from the AGA had said that the army would arrive to pave the way for the mine, meanwhile running the “troublemakers” and “guerrillas” out of Anaime (in Cajamarca), where the extractive activities are due to take place. The community has denounced an increased militarisation of the territory, hand in hand with the mining project. On 22 February, with the occasion of the *Mesa Ciudadana Ambiental* (Citizens' Environmental Forum) in Ibagué (in which the opposition by the community to the project was evident), journalists captured an exchange of messages between

¹ The press release of the Environmental and Peasant Committees of Tolima can be checked at www.rebellion.org

² anarkismo.net

³ For more details about gold mega-mining in the department, its consequences and the opinions of those opposed to it, check the following article (in Spanish) anarkismo.net

the then vice-president of sustainability of *AngloGold*, Rafael Hertz, and the then chief of communication of La Colosa, Ivan Malaver, in which they spoke of having “*identified amongst the oppositional community several guerrillas of Anaime*”⁴.

Following these threats, rumours and stigmatisation, official violence against the community has manifested itself more forcefully during the savage repression by the ESMAD (the riot squad) of protestors who participated in the Popular Agrarian Strike towards the end of August. On that occasion, police opened fire, missing the target, on **Julio Vargas**, president of the community association (*Junta de Acción Comunal*) of El Cedral, Anaime. Today, various threats are still pending against him⁵. This atmosphere of criminalisation of grass-roots organisations as well as social protest in Cajamarca is not an isolated thing, but rather forms part of a generalised context of violence in the department⁶.

Unsuccessfully, the Environmental and Rural Committee had been demanding security for its members, denouncing the stigmatisation campaign, alerting people against the ugly face of counterinsurgency policies which has been used to crush social protest against mega-mining projects and in defence of rural the economy and the environment. This climate has become even more difficult following the bomb attack suffered on 25 October by a delegation of IGAC (the national geographic institute) participating in the Convention to Demarcate the Wetlands and Forests (*Convenio de Delimitación de Páramos y Humedales*) in the highlands of Potosí village, which fortunately did not claim any victims (unfortunately, the driver of the vehicle attacked died days later of the burns caused by the explosion). The media immediately pointed to the people in opposition to the multinational mining company as suspects, leading the editorial of *El Espectador* to affirm, in an unfounded and reckless manner, that the environmental struggle was supposedly incubating a “*new generation of terror*”⁷. This is equivalent to the criminalisation of social protest, equating them with some form of “terrorism”, when in fact, all the evidence points out to right wing paramilitaries as the authors of this hideous attack.

Who benefits from this environment of anxiety and terror?

In this moment of anguish, as well as extending the hand of solidarity to our comrades of the Environmental and Peasant Committee in Cajamarca and their fellow groups in the department and the rest of the country, as well as lending a shoulder of support to the family of César García in this time of need, we should ask the following question: Perhaps now those who defend environmental rights (as insinuated in the *El Espectador* editorial) will be added to the list of “terrorists”, along with those who defend peasant rights, agrarian reform, the commons, etc, etc. We know the latent danger when these descriptions are employed; they represent a green light for military and paramilitary violence.

It is also key to ask ourselves, who benefits from this crime? Activists working against La Colosa have expressed fear that, apparently, there has been a campaign aimed at destabilising public order in favour of the militarisation of the municipality. This would be a prerequisite to advance a project which causes such resistance in the community. Unfortunately we are all too

⁴ www.elnuevodia.com.co and www.elespectador.com Both, in June, resigned their positions.

⁵ www.anarkismo.net

⁶ anarkismo.net

⁷ www.caracol.com.co and www.elespectador.com The editorial from *El Espectador* was replied by the Environmental and Peasant Committees www.elespectador.com

familiar with this situation, where the interests of powerful people are threatened, then “dark forces” arise which plant the seeds of destabilisation, terror, death...after which, in the midst of the onslaught of repression to guarantee “investor security”, the “peacemakers” make their triumphant entry with portfolios brimming with business contracts.

We demand that the truth about this crime comes to light. That the facts surrounding this killing are established, and that the masterminds behind this are clarified and given the appropriate punishment. We join in solidarity with the struggle of the Environmental and Rural Committees in Tolima (*Comités Ambientales y Campesinos*), as well as with their demands for justice and protection. We demand that pressure being brought on the part of the multinational AGA (with complicity of the State authorities) against a community which clearly rejects their mining project be stopped. Today, the department of Tolima, like the rest of the country, requires the unity and the solidarity of grass-roots sectors in the struggle. Unity needs to be understood beyond a mere tactical, circumstantial, sense; we need a profound sense of unity with regard to articulating a vision of the country we want: a country in which people can organise themselves and express their opinions without fearing for their lives, a country in which development is sought equally for everybody, where rights are guaranteed, where important decisions are centred around communities and the environment and not, as in this case, in the profits of a bunch of millionaires and their transnational friends.

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