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Libia Grueso, Buenaventura, Colombia

An Afro-Colombian Civil Rights Leader

Libia Grueso, a social worker and co-founder of the Process of Black Communities (PCN), is one of the most prominent intellectual activists in the Afro-Colombian civil rights movement. In the early 1990s, together with other movement leaders, she led a campaign that secured more than 5.9 million acres in territorial rights for Colombia's black rural communities. Grueso is now focused on protecting Colombia's Pacific rainforest from the escalating threat of armed conflict, environmental ruin and the mass displacement and blockade of Afro-Colombian villagers.

Colombia's Pacific Rainforests: A Region Under Threat

Colombia ranks among the top five nations with the greatest diversity of plant and animal species in the world; it is home to more different kinds of birds and amphibians than any other place on the planet. Yet a long history of colonial exploitation coupled with four decades of the "dirty war" and a thriving narcotics industry have created an ecological catastrophe. These activities have destroyed nearly 30 percent of tropical forests and threatened numerous animals and plants to the point of extinction. The nation's fresh water supply is expected to plummet by 40 percent over the next half-century.

Forgotten and relatively isolated for a long time, Colombia's Pacific Coast region, situated between the westernmost chain of the Andes and the Pacific Ocean, is home to 30 percent of Colombia's 10.6 million Afro-Colombians, the black descendants of slaves emancipated in 1851 without any reparations. Afro-Colombians make up 26 percent of Colombia's total population. Yet in the 1980s, the coast, the poorest region in the entire country, began attracting the attention of overseas developers. Multinational corporations moved in to exploit its natural riches such as gold and oil and to introduce foreign monocrops like the African palm. In the years that followed, armed groups from both sides of Colombia's civil war have intensified their incursions in pursuit of their cut of the profit, including the introduction of illicit crops such as coca, and have caused terrible and widespread devastation. Today, up to 200,000 acres of Pacific rainforest are being destroyed each year by industrial gold mining in an area already devastated by heavy logging. This has also had an impact on indigenous and traditional black cultures, affecting their social relations and their links with nature.

Mounting Violence and Mass Displacement

The power struggle over the coast's resources has resulted in the systematic displacement of more than 1 million Afro-Colombians and, in some cases, entire villages. In many of their

territories, Afro-Colombians have found themselves literally in the line of fire between government forces and armed actors operating outside the law and disputing over territory, agricultural and mineral profits and control of illicit crops.

On May 2, 2002 in one of the worst mass killings to date, an estimated 120 Afro-Colombians from Pacific communities were killed when a bomb launched by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) landed on a church in Chocó, the state with the largest population of Afro-Colombians. These killings came on the heels of massacres in Alto Naya, where 150 people were murdered and quartered with chain saws. Twelve more had also been killed on the shores of the Yurumanguí River. These incursions have caused massive displacements, with 7,200 displaced persons recorded in the port city of Buenaventura alone between 1999 and 2001.

The Rise of Afro-Colombian Rights

Against this deadly backdrop, Grueso and her fellow activists' strong belief in building an inclusive democratic country respectful of differences have made PCN one of the single most visible and effective sectors of the Afro-Colombian social movement. A critical victory came in 1993 with the passage of "Law 70." Grueso was instrumental in pushing through this historic legislation that officially granted Afro-Colombians legal recognition as a distinct ethnicity with cultural and territorial rights on the lands they have populated for hundreds of years. The work carried out by Grueso and Mercedes Moya, as delegates of the newly-formed PCN to the 1991 Constituent Assembly, proved decisive in the inclusion of Transitory Article 55 that recognized the cultural and territorial rights of the black river communities on the basis of their traditional production practices.

Hope Amid Conflict

Since then, the PCN and Grueso have used Law 70 to successfully challenge destructive development projects including timber industry logging, African palm oil plantations, mechanized gold mining and industrial shrimping, which have devastated local mangroves. They have also secured increased government restrictions to mitigate environmental and cultural damage along the coast. To support the recovery of traditional farming and strengthen their cultural identity, Grueso organized educational workshops aimed at renewing rice and sugar cane cultivation along the Yurumanguí River so that river communities can grow their own food and be economically self-sufficient.

Activists like Grueso who have proposed sustainable development models sensitive to cultural and environmental concerns have found themselves at odds with private interests—sometimes at risk to their lives. Some have been persecuted and singled out; others have been murdered. Last year, an Afro-Colombian advocate of Law 70/93 running for mayor of Roberto Payan city was killed for openly criticizing guerrilla activities in his locale. This history of selective assassinations of Afro-Colombian leaders on the coastal region of Nariño has been repeated 75 times since 1998, when Mr. Francisco Hurtado, the first president of an Afro-Colombian community council, was assassinated by paramilitaries while carrying out a census of his community on the Mira River. Hurtado had won a legal action (for protective relief) against the environmental abuse committed by mining operators and palm growers in his territory. In 2002, Sister Yolanda Cerón, a supporter of

Law 70 and the preservation of traditional crops along the Patia River, was also murdered. Her death shocked the entire country. In 2001 seven environmentalists were murdered while hiking in Puracé National Park.

Despite these dangers, Grueso and other PCN members press on, driven by a broad sustainability plan for the entire Pacific region that reflects a vision of development grounded in Afro-Colombian and indigenous cultural and environmental values. Along these lines, she is working at the institutional level to protect Colombia's national parks, particularly those in the Pacific region, from drug fumigation and the threat of privatization. The Colombian government has been steadily cutting back the park department's staff and funding as it seeks to hand over management of the park to private entities. Grueso is critical of this scheme, which is in direct violation of the park's original management plan, an innovative partnership between park officials and community leaders.

Black Environmentalism: A Global Movement by People of African Descent

Grueso is widely perceived as one of the most inspiring leaders at the forefront of Latin America's "Black environmentalism" movement, one of the most exciting and important grassroots movements in recent times, for championing human rights and the environment against the pressures of the global economy and military repression.

Grueso traces the roots of her activism to a childhood spent as the daughter of a fisherman and teacher in the jungles of the Pacific coastlands where villagers rowed canoes up and down the river, men hunted wild pigs, and children were taught to respect nature. She remembers watching her world erode under the pressures of aggressive economic development that decimated large swaths of the jungle for lumber and ruptured the tightly-knit community of her youth.

The Struggle Continues

Today, Grueso and 120 organizations that constitute the PCN continue to pressure the Colombian government to take a stronger stand *for* sustainable development and *against* measures and militaristic organizations that exacerbate armed conflict. She has spoken out against U.S. and European aid and investment in Colombian operations linked to violence and human rights violations in meetings with members of Congress (U.S.) and advocacy groups, at talks at colleges through the U.S. and Canada, and in meetings held by global trade institutions such as the World Trade Organization.

While in the U.S. to accept the Goldman Environmental Prize, Grueso plans to make Hill visits again to voice criticism of the Bush administration's proposed \$618 million (mostly in military aid) to Colombia as well as the U.S.-backed counter-drug measure of highly toxic herbicide fumigation for Colombia and six of its neighbors. She is especially concerned about the consequences of these measures, which have contributed to widespread health problems for surrounding communities and damaged local crops.

"Grueso and the PCN have been the most effective in putting into practice an innovative vision and strategy for sustainable development based on the marriage of ecology and

culture,” said Enrique Leff Zimmerman, coordinator of the Environmental Training Network for Latin America and the Caribbean, United Nations Environment Programme.

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