

Fuelling Fear

The human cost of biofuels in Colombia



Preface

Human rights abuses and violence have escalated in Colombia's south-west Pacific region in the past few years. Hundreds of people, mainly Afro-Colombian youths, are reported to have been killed in Buenaventura alone during 2007 in fighting between the paramilitaries, guerrillas and armed forces; in Nariño, on the southern tip of Colombia bordering Ecuador, as many as 7,000 people have been forced to flee their homes.¹

The situation in the city of Buenaventura is of special concern. It is Colombia's busiest port, and is home to War on Want's partner, Palenque el Congal (from hereon referred to as Palenque). Palenque is an organisation of Colombians of African descent working to protect their communities against the threat of displacement through human rights awareness-raising activities.

This report has been written based on information produced by Palenque and complemented by War on Want's own research. It looks at the role of the guerrillas, paramilitaries and state institutions in the continuing displacement affecting these communities, and in the multiple breaches of their human rights. The report focuses on the most recent and least studied cause of displacement: the production of biofuels, specifically palm oil, at the expense of Afro-Colombian communities' human rights in the south-west Pacific region.

The land seizures taking place in Colombia for biofuel cultivation are not happening in a vacuum. They are directly linked to the increasing global demand for 'green' alternatives to petroleum and a reduction in carbon emissions that harm the environment. Global demand for palm oil has doubled in the last decade, and concern is growing over the impact of biofuel cultivation on global food prices.² But less is known about the threat the biofuels revolution poses to the security of vulnerable communities in places like Colombia.

The UK government has a history of supporting Colombia's military campaign to defeat the guerrilla forces and has been accused of turning a blind eye to human rights abuses against civilians.³ As the demand for palm oil and other biofuels increases, it is now time to question the role played by the UK government and other investors in propagating further violence and bloodshed against the Afro-Colombian communities, whose right to land and security is increasingly under threat as a result of the biofuels revolution.



Sue Branford
Chair, War on Want

Afro-Colombians under fire

Colombians of African descent and those of indigenous communities make up approximately one quarter of Colombia's population of 40 million.* More than 80% of Afro-Colombians live in extreme poverty. They represent well over 75% of the poor and earn one third of the income of their non-black counterparts. Government failure to recognise the difficulties faced by this community has led to poor services and a lack of social investment in areas inhabited by Afro-Colombians, thus perpetuating poverty and inequality. They are concentrated mainly in the south and south-west Pacific regions of the country. In Buenaventura, 98% of the population is Afro-Colombian.

Afro-Colombian urban and rural communities have the lowest social and economic indicators in the country. An estimated 60% do not have access to basic health care, and the illiteracy rate in some regions is as high as 45%. Life expectancy for Afro-Colombians in 2005 was estimated at 55 years, compared with the national average of 64 years.⁴

Human rights violations against this community are perpetrated on a large scale by the paramilitaries and guerrillas. The Colombian army and the police have also been involved. In the Pacific region, confrontation between paramilitaries and guerrilla groups began in 1998. These conflicts provoked the first massive displacements. In the years that followed the conflict spread into the urban area in and around Buenaventura, Colombia's largest port. Now, violent crimes and human

rights violations are being committed against the residents of Buenaventura on a daily basis. War on Want partner Palenque notes that by November 2007 there had been 477 violent deaths in the municipality.⁵

There are anywhere between 3,000 and 9,000 armed groups operating in Colombia. Since the 1990s, paramilitary groups made up of local warlords, members of local political and economic elites, organised crime and drug barons have wielded significant influence over Colombia's political and economic development as well as playing a central role in retaliation against guerrilla forces. Although paramilitary groups such as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) were originally seen as counterinsurgency forces fighting against these guerrilla groups, by the end of the 1990s it had become clear that much of their activities involved drug smuggling, extortion from local businesses and authorities and land seizures to make way for coca production. Collusion between government forces and illegal paramilitary groups, who conduct the majority of the assassinations and human rights violations, is well established.⁶

Guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) have been fighting the government for decades, and have been responsible for numerous human rights abuses against the Colombian population. In the south Pacific regions, the ELN has worked with FARC rebels fighting paramilitaries to

* Afro-Colombians, also known as Afro-descendants, and indigenous communities are the groups primarily affected by human rights abuses and discriminatory practices in south-west Colombia. This report focuses mainly on Afro-Colombian communities in this region, although indigenous groups are also affected, particularly in the department of Valle del Cauca where War on Want's partner Palenque el Congal works.

retain control of the coca plantations and the drugs trade.⁷

In Nariño, both guerrilla and paramilitary forces have been held responsible for continuing violence and killing of civilians, and fighting for control of the drugs trade and particular territories.⁸

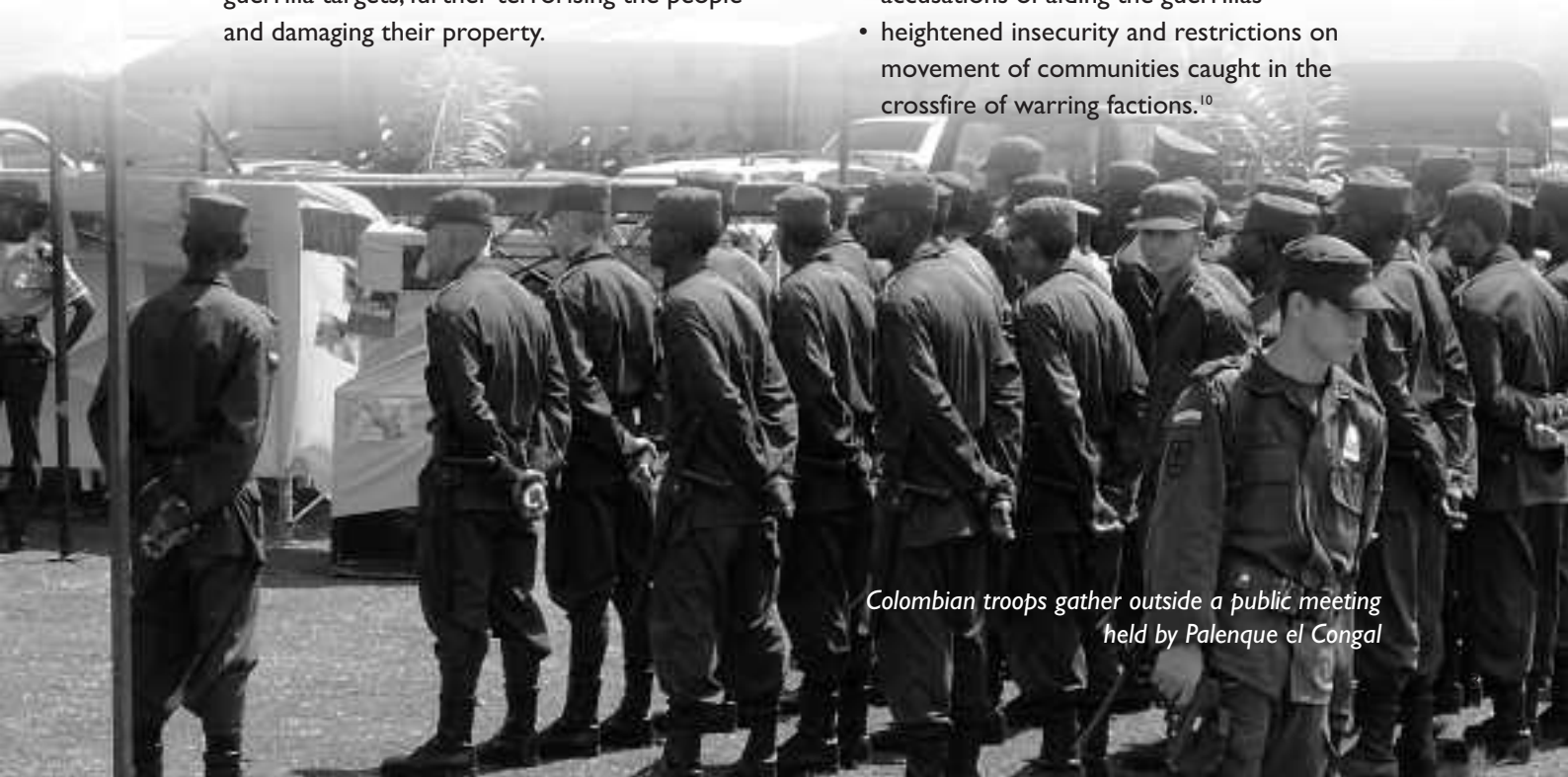
In Buenaventura, FARC militias have violently taken control of neighbourhoods formerly controlled by the paramilitaries. Like the paramilitaries, FARC militias force the local population to pay 'taxes'. At the end of 2006, the FARC had reportedly committed six selective killings in Valle del Cauca, along the Yurumanguí, Naya and Mayorquín rivers. Combat operations have also taken place between the FARC and ELN guerrillas. Guerrillas attack military positions in the middle of civilian communities, terrorising resident civilians caught in the crossfire. In response to guerrilla attacks, the military calls in air support which fires indiscriminately into these civilian communities as well as at their guerrilla targets, further terrorising the people and damaging their property.

These events have caused restrictions on foodstuffs and movement of residents, and led to some 6,820 people being internally displaced in Buenaventura in 2007.⁹

The role of the police as a protective force does not inspire confidence among the Colombian population. Hit and runs, abuse and illegal actions are common occurrences among the police, the DAS (Department of Administration and Security) and the DIJIN (Investigative Crime Unit). In the south-west Pacific region there is also endemic institutional racism towards Afro-Colombians.

Palenque noted the following discriminatory practices by the security forces:

- the illegal use of public buildings, schools and health posts
- intimidating armed presence at community meetings in urban and rural zones
- confiscation of local fishing equipment and boats, forcing fishermen to pay fines to buy back their tools
- arbitrary arrests justified by false accusations of aiding the guerrillas
- heightened insecurity and restrictions on movement of communities caught in the crossfire of warring factions.¹⁰



Colombian troops gather outside a public meeting held by Palenque el Congal

The rush for biofuels

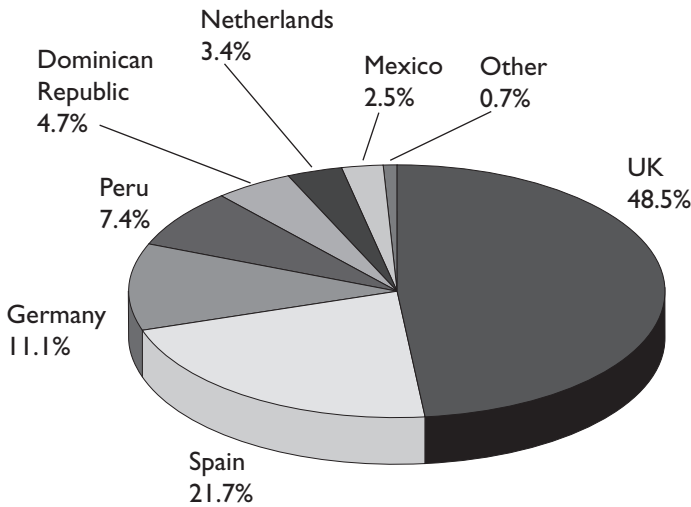
Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe announced on 7 August 2007, at the start of his second term, that production of biofuels would be one of his administration's priorities. The biofuels industry is driving the spread of crops such as sugar cane and cassava that had not previously been mass cultivated in regions such as Valle del Cauca.¹¹ This expansion stemmed from a series of land laws that were recently passed through the Colombian parliament designed to facilitate the attempts of agri-businesses to cultivate crops for biofuel production. Afro-Colombian communities were largely excluded from this process, and now face having their land rights and security violated due to the expansion of these plantations.

Driving much of President Uribe's interest in expanding the biofuels industry has been the increased demand at international level for renewable energy sources which could cut

greenhouse gas emissions. Crops such as sugar cane, corn and palm can be used to power engines in place of petroleum-based fuels and have numerous other uses in everyday products such as cooking oil and soap.

In June 2007, as President Uribe approached his second consecutive term in office, he announced that Colombia's palm cultivation would increase to 400,000 hectares that year.¹² Grown in Colombia since the 1930s, oil palm, which originated from Africa, is one of the main crops used in the production of biofuels. There are now over 350,000 hectares of oil palm trees grown across Colombia.¹³ The country now leads the Americas in palm production, and is the fifth largest producer and exporter of palm oil in the world.¹⁴ Nariño and Valle del Cauca reportedly accounted for approximately 125,750 tonnes of production in 2005.¹⁵

Colombian Palm Oil Exports



Source: National Federation of Oil Palm Producers

Since the Colombian government's push to expand biofuel production, agri-businesses and development agencies have expressed interest in being involved in what is seen by international observers as a lucrative and environmentally sound industry. The US government, for instance, in its efforts to eradicate illicit crops in Colombia, has supported alternative crop production through the USAID funded programme ADAM (Areas for Municipal-Level Alternative Development Program). This programme began in 2005 ostensibly "to establish a successful, sustainable, and participative model for alternative development that creates economic opportunities, strengthens local governance, and promotes a culture of 'zero illicit crops,' while also improving the quality of life for marginalised populations of rural

Colombia."¹⁶ ADAM works closely with Colombia's Presidential Office for Social Action and International Cooperation and has projects in 12 departments including Cauca, Valle del Cauca and Nariño.

By far the largest market for Colombian palm oil is the European Union, which in 2005 accounted for 85% of the country's exports, with the principal importer being the UK.¹⁷ An estimated 39% of all Colombia's exported palm oil and palm oil products are destined for the UK, where, as with other countries, palm oil is used in margarine, crisps, pastries, detergents, soap and toothpaste as well as being used to replace petroleum-based fuels. Well known brands such as Cadbury, Heinz and Walkers all use palm oil in their products.¹⁸



Colombian farmer growing sugar cane, another crop commonly used to produce biofuels
© Elcio Carriço/War on Want

Biofuels and displacement

There is an emerging pattern of displacement and human rights violations against Afro-Colombian communities connected to palm oil cultivation. Numerous cases of communities being threatened and attacked by paramilitary groups have been reported. Not long after the communities have fled, vast swathes of land that were once small-scale farms are taken over for palm cultivation. International agri-businesses have been accused of colluding with paramilitary groups and using them as private security contractors in order to gain control over these areas.¹⁹

Palm plantations have been the scene of combat, persecution and armed violence by all parties. Guerrillas have murdered and kidnapped the palm companies' owners and employees and have dynamited extraction plants. The armed forces and paramilitary groups have become private security corps for palm producers, and have committed many of the extrajudicial executions reported in the palm production areas. Civil society members who have attempted to challenge the expansion of biofuels, such as trade union activists within these communities, have also been harassed and threatened, some of them killed or 'disappeared' under mysterious circumstances.²⁰

The department of Nariño has been the scene of increasing violence and forced displacement due to the proliferation of biofuels. Since October 2007, some claim that as much as 70% of the population of Nariño's western mountain range have been displaced. As with coca cultivation before it, paramilitary groups have found ways of getting around the laws protecting indigenous and Afro-Colombian

rights to land and have falsified documents and identities in order to gain control of these territories, as well as carrying out forced evictions.²¹

The vast majority of Afro-Colombians forced off their land have wound up in cities like Buenaventura. Though they have abandoned their land, they have not managed to escape the violence, as the incidents below demonstrate.

In 2007 in the Santa Cruz neighbourhood of Buenaventura, paramilitary personnel gathered up a group of youths under the false pretext of organising a football game, claiming that the winning team would be paid 200,000 pesos. The young men, all aged between 15 and 22 years, were later found dead, floating in the Estero las Vegas river.

In Lleras Camargo, one of the most violent areas in Buenaventura, four men boarded a bus and shot indiscriminately at crowds as it travelled through the city. Many were killed, including a pregnant woman. The men left the bus, and the next day the driver was reportedly sought by the police, military, paramilitaries and the guerrillas. He was eventually caught by the police and incarcerated for three weeks. When he was released, the guerrillas offered him and his family protection in exchange for his membership. He refused and a few months later, after one of the guerrillas had been captured, the bus driver started to receive death threats and his house was ransacked. Feeling his life was in danger, he was forced to leave the area for good.²²

Displacement in Colombia

as of January 2008

	Displacement by department	Type of Displacement		
		Individual	Massive	General
1	Antioquia	250,145	133,227	383,372
2	Bolívar	181,741	36,906	218,647
3	Magdalena	111,745	36,120	147,865
4	Cesar	119,949	8,379	128,328
5	Caquetá	113,799	8,173	121,972
6	Chocó	59,057	56,763	115,820
7	Tolima	106,473	6,499	112,972
8	Putumayo	96,846	10,305	107,151
9	Valle Del Cauca	67,288	32,858	100,146
10	Cauca	67,250	23,231	90,481
11	Meta	82,330	6,857	89,187
12	Sucre	84,388	3,062	87,450
13	North Santander	68,207	16,671	84,878
14	Córdoba	70,442	12,813	83,255
15	Nariño	54,264	26,618	80,882
16	Santander	59,116	2,990	62,106
17	Caldas	27,342	25,428	52,770
18	La Guajira	33,915	10,466	44,381
19	Cundinamarca	37,096	5,495	42,591
20	Arauca	35,110	3,796	38,906
21	Huila	36,079	1,131	37,210
22	Guaviare	28,460	2,410	30,870
23	Undeclared	29,125	1,096	30,221
24	Casanare	17,696	3,453	21,149
25	Risaralda	14,808	733	15,541
26	Boyacá	9,894	294	10,188
27	Vichada	6,383	10	6,393
28	Quindío	4,220		4,220
29	Atlántico	3,694	28	3,722
30	Vaupés	2,428		2,428
31	Bogotá.	2,309	28	2,337
32	Guainía	1,769	50	1,819
33	Amazonas	573		573
34	Archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina	7		7
	Total	1,883,948	475,890	2,359,838

Source: Department of Valle del Cauca

Cocaine: the cycle repeated

The race for land to grow biofuel crops threatens to mirror that of another notorious source of displacement: cocaine. For two decades now Colombia has been the world's largest producer of cocaine and, as a result, has been one of the principal targets for the US-sponsored 'war on drugs'. But despite billions of dollars spent on counter-narcotics programmes, production of cocaine has remained relatively constant. As a result of the fight for land and control of the drug trade there are an estimated three million internally displaced people in Colombia.

Abductions and attacks by guerrillas, land seizures by paramilitary groups, and government schemes aimed at eradicating illicit crops have resulted in civilians being threatened and forced off their land. They are caught in a cycle of violence and forced evictions that has escalated in recent years, making it the worst displacement crisis outside Africa.

The main efforts to eradicate coca have been through the Plan Colombia programme, started in 1999 and supported by the US State Department. Since then, billions of dollars have been pumped into aerial fumigation campaigns aimed at destroying coca plantations and dislodging the FARC from their rebel bases. The UK government has also provided military assistance for these purposes.

However, it has been noted by numerous agencies working on the ground that these

actions, rather than eradicating the crop, have served to push its cultivation into other areas. In addition, poor farmers whose plantations have been ruined by the chemicals from aerial fumigation have started growing coca as a means of survival. In the case of the Pacific regions, fumigations have forced coca production into other areas which are controlled by paramilitaries, such as Nariño. Despite the disbanding of some paramilitary groups in recent years, newly formed paramilitary groups now control much of the coca production throughout the country. They use the same brutal tactics as their predecessors to force people off their land to exploit the resources and expand plantations of coca.²³

Afro-Colombian communities in Nariño have complained of ruined crops due to fumigation campaigns and of harassment by local forces. Drug turf wars between the paramilitaries and guerrilla groups continue to threaten their security. The security forces have also been accused of helping paramilitaries in the war against guerrillas for the purposes of gaining control over local resources, be they coca plantations, mines, palm plantations and other profit-making enterprises.

Coca cultivation has once again been forced into neighbouring regions such as Cauca and Valle del Cauca, where War on Want partner Palenque el Congal is based. In addition, Palenque also reports that large plantations of biofuel crops such as palm oil have been forced upon them.



Protecting Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities

To provide for the basic and immediate needs of displaced people, Colombia's Department of Administration re-activated an initiative to develop a Unified Plan of Action (PIU) for the Valle del Cauca in 2004. The PIU's framework, developed with support from the US government and the International Organisation for Migration, consists of programmes promising prevention and protection of displaced people, humanitarian action, socioeconomic stabilisation and strengthening of institutions.

In reality, however, the PIU's policies, projects and programmes have failed to get off the ground due to a lack of resources needed for implementation, provoked partly by a lack of commitment at governmental level to this issue.²⁴ Many Afro-Colombian and indigenous people who have been forced off their land either due to conflict or to provide space for the cultivation of biofuels, coca or other crops find themselves with little immediate support or protection. The government provides basic humanitarian aid in the form of food packages but this does not last for very long. Afro-Colombians are unable to get subsidised housing as many do not have bank accounts, and because they are displaced they are forced into a vicious cycle of being unable to access or pay for basic services.²⁵ In addition, there are restrictions on their freedom of movement due to government quotas on the use of fuel, which these communities rely on to power their boats to move across the Yurumanguí River. Freedom of movement of these communities in the south-west is supposed to be guaranteed by the security forces, who in theory should protect communities, but as War on Want partner Palenque has observed, in fact the opposite is true.²⁶

The 1991 constitution and Law 70 of 1993 gave Afro-Colombian communities collective rights to ancestral lands. The Law includes provisions regarding economic and social development mechanisms, protection of cultural identity and Afro-Colombians' rights to ethno-education, social services, training, health and human rights. It is designed to ensure that Afro-Colombian communities are consulted, through community councils, and participate in the planning and implementation of development projects in their communal lands.

Lands held collectively under Law 70 cannot legally be sold in part, nor can territory be segmented to outside interests. These lands are held in collective trusts to be administered through the community councils, which represent the communities legally. They are tasked with the administration, governance and decision-making responsibility regarding the territories and their inhabitants.²⁷ They have been unified and persistent in calling on the Colombian government to consult and negotiate with them regarding the use of lands under their jurisdiction. However, despite the fact that prior consultation is required by the law, it is not happening.

The rights of Afro-Colombians were never fully recognised in practice and legislation that has been introduced under the Uribe administration further undermines their rights as the administration seeks to expand resource extraction projects at the expense of the communities' collective rights. The formulation and implementation of legislation such as the Forestry Law and Rural Development Law have excluded Afro-Colombian community representation, and

have sought to encourage de facto privatisation and isolation of lands that, by rights, belong to Afro-Colombian communities.

In response, regional community councils and national social movements are taking matters into their own hands. One example of this is crop eradication of coca and palm in areas where their land has been illegally expropriated. Palenque, as well as other social movements, has decided to campaign actively against palm and coca cultivation, knowing that they both threaten the cultural and social fabric of their communities, as well as threatening their capacity to organise. In November 2007, at the Yurumanguí River in Buenaventura, the Black Community Movement physically eradicated 25 hectares of coca in protest.

In addition, these social movements have highlighted the negative social and environmental impacts of palm cultivation, which pollutes the food chain and water supplies through its extraction and the use of herbicides and chemical fertilisers. Along the Yurumanguí River, groups like Palenque have opposed the expansion of palm cultivation due to these negative consequences, and in 2007 wrote a statement noting:

1. The government is preparing to pass legislation that will enable it to expropriate collectively owned land for the use of this type of destructive crop cultivation. The government allows fumigation to occur which affects the nutritional quality of the crop, multiplying health problems, making

access to uncontaminated water difficult as well as adding to an overall food crisis affecting the population.

2. Such actions tend to increase armed conflict, encouraging the presence of paramilitaries. There are subsequently higher rates of disappearances, massacres and population displacements.
3. These measures encourage like-minded agriculturalists to pursue similar types of harmful exploitation in the stated lands, thus creating a negative culture which is quickly assimilated by the natives thus adding to the social and cultural deficit which already exists.
4. Prostitution develops in these regions, adding to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and leading to the loss of those cultural values that previously checked such negative effects.
5. The ability of communities to organise politically is compromised, diminishing the possibility of creating a Colombia according to the dreams, customs and aspirations of its people, and destroying any sense of identity that may have been used for positive social ends.
6. The government has responded to this criticism by offering the plantation of palm as a substitution for coca, infringing the agreements that they previously established with local communities.

Conclusion

With international interest and investment in biofuels set to rise, Colombia is likely to continue seizing the opportunity to increase its share in production and exports.

The UK, despite being one of the largest consumers of Colombia's palm oil products, remains unaware of the devastating impact of cultivation of this crop on the lives of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. This is despite the British government's admission in its own research that increased palm production in Colombia is likely to provoke more forced evictions, land grabs, pollution of waterways and the destruction of forests.²⁸

The chocolate, margarine or soap that we see on supermarkets shelves contains palm oil that has a good chance of coming from a country where thousands of people are being forced off their land, some of them brutally killed, in order to meet international demand. In addition, as the race to reduce global warming continues, the British government and investors in biofuel production must recognise that the land belonging to indigenous and Afro-descended people is not for sale and that further palm cultivation will serve to increase violence and displacement in south-west Colombia.

War on Want's partner Palenque el Congal works with marginalised Afro-Colombian communities who are affected by the internal conflict to enhance their civil, political, land and cultural rights. Community-led initiatives facilitated by Palenque are leading to an increased awareness of basic human rights among the black population. Palenque is trying to lessen the number of communities

displaced within the Valle de Cauca as a result of the armed conflict by capacity building for local communities through training in conflict resolution and human rights awareness; provision of seeds and tools to families to enable communities to grow food and distribute it amongst the poorest families; advocacy through dissemination of published reports at public meetings, lobbying at national, regional and local levels, and a public awareness campaign.

Included in these campaigns are regular protest marches. On 31 May 2007 Palenque took part in a demonstration that demanded that national and international bodies take action to confront the dismal situation in the port city of Buenaventura. Through constant campaigning and social projects funded by NGOs such as War on Want, movements like Palenque are continuing the fight for the rights of Afro-Colombian communities.

All readers are urged to call on the UK government to withdraw its military support for President Uribe's government by writing to Rt Hon David Miliband MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AH.

Further, if you would like to support War on Want's work with partners like Palenque el Congal you can make a donation by sending a cheque to War on Want, FREEPOST (that's all you need to write on the envelope). War on Want makes long-term commitments to grassroots organisations across the developing world. If you would like to help us continue to support these vital projects, join us by becoming a member today.

Notes

- Open letter from US organisations and concerned individuals to the Honourable Colombian Vice-President Francisco Santos, 11 April 2007
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