

## Afro-Colombians

### Profile

Colombia has the second largest African descendant population in Latin America. According to the census of 2005, the government estimates that Afro-descendants make up 10.6% of the total population. This is 16% down from the government's previous estimations in 2002, which put the total Afro-descendant population at 26% and which is the figure still currently used by the United Nations. Census figures also continue to be disputed by Afro-descendant leaders such as Luis Giraldo Murillo Urritia, ex governor of the department of Choco, who claims that the Afro-Colombian population is as high as 36-40% (Dollars & Sense, 2007).

African descendants are present in every major city in the country. It is thought that there are 1 million living in the capital of Bogota. Coastal regions of Colombia can have Afro-Colombian populations that are as high as 90% as in the case of the Pacific, or 60% on the Atlantic coast. The department of Chocó is the most African descendant state, followed by Magdalena (72%), Bolivar (66%), and Sucre (65%). Southern Valle, northern Cauca and Uraba have 65% black populations.

Over 70% of blacks live in urban and peri-urban areas. In this fragile ecosystem Afro-Colombians are peasant farmers (*campesinos*) and see themselves as the natural custodians of the country's biodiversity on which they depend for their subsistence and the maintenance of their cultural identity. Afro-descendants practice crop diversity while delegating animal husbandry and other agricultural tasks to the indigenous Embera, a relationship which has led to tension as pressure on available land increases.

The Colombian Department for National Statistics (DANE) has recognized that there are four distinct Afro-Colombian groups in the country and that two of these speak their own native languages. 'Bande' is spoken by Afro-Colombian communities who live on the islands of the Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, and 'Palenquero', which is spoken by the communities of San Basilio de Palenque, recognized since 1603 as being the first free settlement of the Americas. According to DANE (2005) this first free settlement has also been declared by UNESCO as being an international cultural heritage site.

### Historical context

Enslaved Africans were first brought by Spanish colonists to Cartagena in the sixteenth century, to replace the lost labour on the plantations and mines which occurred as a result of the decimation of the indigenous population due partly to the harsh working conditions. (DANE 2005).

The relative autonomy of Afro-Colombians in the northern region of Chocó came to a violent end in the 1970s when their lands were usurped for cultivation of soya beans. Since then there has been a steady flow of migration by these communities towards the urban city centres as communities attempt to escape poverty and the violence generated by the war. According to UNHCR Afro-Colombians represent 17% of all internally displaced persons in the country and Afro-Colombian women and children are included

as some of those worst affected by the war.

Afro-Colombian communities and collective territories are mostly concentrated in the resource rich and geopolitically strategic regions of the country that continue to be the scenes of fierce disputes between armed groups. Along the Pacific coast the fight for the control and exploitation of collective lands by armed actors has meant that such communities have found themselves caught up in the cross fire or continuously on the front line of the conflict.

### **'Peace communities'**

Today Afro-Colombians have organized into *peace communities or community councils*, and have created black processes which work towards the autonomy/self-determination and empowerment of Afro-descendant communities and propagate the active neutrality of these black communities within the conflict. Some have called for the mass withdrawal of all black people from the conflict since it can be classified as being racist, for the disproportionate suffering it causes to Colombia's ethnic minorities. The fact that neither side has ever really fought to defend their interests or improve their quality of life is also seen as justification for advocating the withdrawal of all blacks

Afro-Colombian political consciousness is part of a strong culture of resistance waged by people of African descent in the face of colonial oppression and ethnic discrimination. An example of this culture of political resistance in Colombia traces its roots back to the experience of the *palenqueros*, or the establishment of colonies of free Africans during slavery. During the anti-colonial war for liberation led by Simon Bolivar and Francisco de Paula Santander, such was the rage of Afro-Colombian slaves and former slaves that they represented 3 out every five soldiers, although they still had to wait another 40 years after the war had been won before slavery was formally abolished in 1851 (Bacon 2007, DANE, 2005). Modern formal political organization by African descendants based on ethnicity and the collective experience of racial discrimination, later evolved as a reaction to the emergence of indigenous minority organizations.

From the beginning of the 19th century the Colombian government actively pursued a policy of 'blanqueamiento', or 'whitening' of society (*Semana*, 24/05/07). This was based both on a white supremacist ideology which believed that to whiten the race was to improve the race, and on a xenophobic policy which feared the eventual political empowerment and influence of black and indigenous peoples if their numbers were allowed to increase (*Semana*, 24/05/07). The idea of *mestizaje* or the unified *mestizo* Colombian nation, which never experienced social tensions based on race or ethnicity evolved as an outcome of such policies, although increasingly Colombian and Latin American academics are re-evaluating or deconstructing this idea (*Semana*, 24/05.07). During the 2004 visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia ethnic minority communities complained of the persistence of an ethnocentric culture that places an emphasis on a Hispanic heritage while ignoring the cultural contributions made by the indigenous, Afro-Colombian and Gypsy communities to the present constitutionally declared multicultural nation.

### **Black political consciousness**

The 1990s saw an increasing resurgence of black political consciousness, which in turn sparked internal debates among Afro-Colombians and intellectuals on what it meant to be black in the predominantly mestizo nation in which they had been traditionally marginalized and discriminated against. Such debates led to the birth of movements which aspired toward black political, economic and social empowerment and which through its cultural focus aimed toward a redefinition of the Afro-Colombian identity. Afro-Colombians, both men and women, began to be elected to the senate, and occupy prominent political positions, like Senator Piedad Cordoba and Congressman Edgar Torres. In the 2002

elections for an Afro-Colombian representative, 150,000 people voted for prominent sports figures Maria Isabel Urrutria and Wellington Ortiz. In 2007 Uribe appointed the first black female minister in the history of Colombian politics. Some say that this is a positive step forward and a demonstration of the government's willingness to recognise the important cultural contributions that Afro-Colombians have made to the nation. Others however, are more sceptical viewing such moves as being strategic and political, especially in light of the government's desire to gain the support of the US Congressional Black Caucus in Washington which will play an important role in decisions affecting the ratification of the TLC (*Semana*, 24/05/07).

## **Mega projects**

Despite the passing of law 70 in 1993 which granted collective land titles for black communities and their right to the management of the resources found within them, Afro-Colombian collective territories are increasingly threatened by the arbitrary implementation of economic development or mega-projects. The implementation of such projects have been associated with brutal forced displacement, mass violence and selected killings of Afro-descendants and their leaders by both legal and illegal armed groups usually at the behest of the government and international and private capital interests. In 2002 a small Afro-Colombian fishing village in Chocó lost 10% of its population in the most violent massacre in Colombia's forty-year war. This tragic battle between the FARC and the paramilitary group ACCU took place in a rural church in Bellavista, Bojayá, 119 people lost their lives, of which 45 were children, and another 108 people were injured. Many of the over 500 people huddled in the church of St. Paul the Apostle in Bellavista were seeking sanctuary, and were displaced from other small towns in the region.

## **Current issues**

### **Socio-economic inequality**

Afro-Colombians are approximately a quarter of the entire population, but represent well over three quarters of the poor. On average Afro-Colombians earn \$500 a year compared to \$1,500 dollars for their white/mestizo counterparts (Dollar & Sense 2007). The lack of economic opportunities for blacks is paradoxical because Afro-Colombians, have educational performance levels that are equal to or greater than other ethnic groups in the country. According to recent World Bank reports, Afro-Colombians attend primary schools at a level higher than the national average, with 42 percent of blacks in school compared to 32 percent of all Colombians, but black students are less likely to attend high school, because secondary education is available to only 62 percent of Afro-Colombians compared to 75 percent of all Colombians. The quality of secondary schools available to blacks is extremely low, according to the ICFES, a national college entrance exam board, 65 percent of schools in Afro-Colombian communities are identified as poor quality or very poor quality. Only 14 percent of blacks pursue higher education compared to 26 percent of all adults in the nation, although blacks and whites have roughly the same high literacy rates (89 percent for blacks and 94 percent for the country as a whole).

Afro-Colombian municipalities do not have sufficient government resources to provide basic services to their communities, and 60% of Afro-Colombians in the country do not have access to basic health care services 57% of all babies born to Afro-Colombian mothers are premature.

Leading Afro-Colombian activists speak of the existence of a geographical apartheid and a structural and institutionalized racism that continues to permeate Colombian society. This is characterised by the absence of the state and the lack of infrastructural or meaningful investment in these regions. Despite having established the Department for Ethnic Affairs, which has a special department within it to monitor socio-economic development in predominantly Afro-Colombian regions through the so-called

National Development Plan. But the government has re-directed the resources necessary to support the implementation of these programmes towards the increasing costs of the conflict.

In the early months of 2007 it was reported that 40 Afro-Colombian children died due to starvation and severe malnutrition (Semana 24/05/07).

### **Impact of the civil war**

The encroaching conflict is devastating African descendant regions. The war and trafficking are permeating the Pacific coast and African descendant communities as far away as the island territories of San Andres and Providencia. Many young people in these communities have limited options beyond fighting, drug trafficking, or being trafficked for prostitution. Only 3% of black workers have access to social security benefits while 28% of white workers are protected by employment protections. Blacks with limited opportunities for meaningful employment may be tempted by the guerrilla, paramilitary, drug trade, or accompanying forms of trafficking and prostitution that support the conflict. Recent estimates suggest that up to 40% of paramilitary and guerrilla recruits are African descendants in coastal regions (Gamboa, 2005). The paramilitary and guerrilla are extremely risky options, but in regions with extreme poverty, they may provide the only source of survival. Further, given the long-standing conflict in Colombia guerrilla and paramilitary groups often provide a source of income, and often offer an informal network of benefits that parallels a social security system. Given the extremely low rates of social security benefits obtained by Afro-Colombian workers, a small pension, or survivor benefits to family, may serve as an incentive to join the war.

### **Mega-projects and land rights**

Along with the indigenous peoples, regions with the highest concentration of Afro-descendant communities are the areas worst affected by the violence of the conflict. As a result Afro-Colombian communities are some of those whose collective and individual human rights are abused and violated on a regular and increasing basis. In the OHCHR country report of 2007 and in a press release issued by UNHCR in April 2005, concern was expressed over the pending extinction of the Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples as a direct outcome of the conflict. Afro-Colombian activists themselves claim that they are the victims of a slow process of ethnocide fuelled by the simultaneous economic and physical aggression waged against them by the implementation of large-scale economic development and mega-projects without their consent. They argue that mega-projects such as those currently being implemented for the mass expansion of palm oil plantations endanger the territorial basis for maintaining the unique Afro-Colombian culture and social structure which has developed over the last 500 years (Dollars & Sense, 2007).

Mega-projects are often financed by the Colombian government, international private capital, international financial institutions and the governments of the United States or European Union through for example, USAID, and the European Union funds for cooperation in development (*Dollars & Sense*, 27/07/07, Kucharz 2007) Such funds aim to support the process of the paramilitary demobilization through the creation of alternative agricultural projects which serve to re-employ and re-integrate ex-combatants into civilian life.

However, NGOs claim that the demobilization process has not brought an end to the violence and the human rights abuses suffered by Afro-Colombian communities. To date such projects have been noted for carrying the heavy cost of the continued forced displacements of Afro-Colombians, as lands allocated for the implementation of such projects are often found in the collective territories legally granted to them under the law 70 of 1993 (*Dollars & Sense*, 27/07/07). According to the Colombian NGO *Justice and Peace*, whose claims are supported by other indigenous organisations including the

ONIC, the government is currently undertaking a process of counter -agrarian reform in the midst of the demobilization process, which involves the rewriting of land regulation that will take away collective land titles from Afro-descendant communities. In response to such threats activists have openly stated their opposition to the signing of the treaty with the USA, warning that the agreement will lead to further forced and mass displacement and the illegal usurpation of their lands.

## **Environment and human rights abuses**

Some activists have highlighted the intimate relationship that exists in Colombia between environmental destruction and the violation of human rights as a distinct feature of the conflict (Kucharz, 2007). Such claims have been supported by the Colombian Human Rights Ombudsman which has verified the findings of a report written by the NGO Human Rights Everywhere, highlighting the devastation caused by the palm oil industry on the fragile eco-systems and rich biological diversity of the Pacific coast region and its populations (Kucharz, 2007). The INCODER (Colombian Institute for Rural Development) also confirmed that in 95% of cases there were massive irregularities in the ways in which the companies had come to occupy and exploit the land, including the illegal appropriation of collective Afro-Colombian territories. It then went on to demand the immediate cessation of planting (ibid.). The Inter-American Court on Human Rights urged the government to halt the expansion of the palm oil industry until the situation had been resolved, but the president himself continues to express his desire to increase the area of palm oil plantations throughout the country to 600,000 acres (ibid).

A practical grass roots collective response to this dynamic has developed along the Pacific coast with the establishment of a number of highly effective and well organized peaceful Afro-Colombian movements for resistance. Such movements include the Comunidad de Auto-Determinacion, Vida y Dignidad of Cacarica (CAVIDA) or processes for self-determination and self sufficiency led by PCN. - A network of over 140 black organisations.

CAVIDA was formed in response to 'Operation Genesis' of 1996 and 1997 which led to the murder of 85 people and the mass displacement of over 4000 (Castrillon, 2007), one of the largest mass displacements in the history of the Colombian conflict. At that time a brutal military operation was unleashed on these communities as a means to forward government and private capital's interests to gain control and exploit the resources found within the lands upon which these communities reside.

Communities recall the government's justification for the brutal operation carried out by the 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Colombian in coordination with armed guards dressed in civilian clothing as being to punish them for being auxiliaries of the guerilla.

Francisco Hurtado, who was assassinated in 1998, was one of the first Afro-Colombian leaders to advocate that Afro-Colombians struggle to regain titles to the lands where their ancestors settled many centuries before. Since then many other Afro-Colombian leaders with similar visions have also been assassinated. In 2007, according to the PCN leader Juan de Dios Mosquera, government security forces in coordination with right wing paramilitaries attempted to assassinate him for the work he continues to carry out in opposition to the illegal appropriation of Afro-Colombian territories. While he managed to escape being murdered, seven of his family members who he left behind were killed instead (Dollars & Sense, 2007).

PCN along with other Colombian social movements recently held the first interethnic meeting on mining in Colombia. In the communiqué released as an outcome of the event, organizations make clear and known their rejections of the government's new mining code and the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (TLC), and openly denounce the activities of foreign multinational corporations which have been engaged in or connected to scandals involving payments to legal and illegal private security

companies to protect their operations; or their failure to investigate assassinations carried out by right wing paramilitaries against trade unionists defending the rights of their workers. Companies mentioned include Coca Cola, Drummond, and Chiquita brands (PCN communiqué, 24/07/07).

## **Raizales**

The Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina is isolated and located within the western waters of the Caribbean Sea, 180km from the Central American coast, 400km from Jamaica and 480kms, from the Colombian coast. The islands were declared a biosphere reserve by UNESCO in 2000 (Raizal report 2007).

The indigenous peoples of the islands, known as the Raizal, are the descendants of the original settlers, enslaved Africans, Amerindians and British emigrants and number 24,444 according official statistics (OHCHR, 2004). The majority of the Raizales speak Creole and English and are predominantly of the Protestant faith (OHCHR, 2004).

In his 2004 report the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia, urged the government to take steps to resolve the special situation of the Raizales peoples, who claim a distinct identity from other Colombians. Historically the islands have experienced an unsettled colonial history which has seen control of the Islands changing hands between foreign colonial powers such as the Spanish and English, and regional powers such as Guatemala, Nicaragua and Colombia. In 1928 the Esguerra-Barcenas treaty was signed between Colombia and Nicaragua where the Raizal territory was partitioned and ceded to the Colombian government (Raizal report 2007).

Nonetheless, due to the extremely rich biodiversity and natural resources that the Archipelago possesses, control of the territory continues to be a source of great dispute between the governments of Nicaragua and Colombia as the territory is situated in closer proximity to the former.

This history is at the root of the current oppression and multiple discrimination that the Raizal people are experiencing. They argue that the discrimination against them is at once, racial, religious, linguistic, political and socio-economic.

Since the declaration of the Islands as a Freeport in 1953 the Raizal peoples charge the Colombian government of introducing policies which have encouraged accelerated mass immigration by Colombian nationals to their islands. This mass migration has led to huge over-population which is having disastrous consequences for the environment and has left the Raizales population as the overwhelming minority. One example of a development project that is currently being implemented by the Colombian government in order to attract greater tourism includes the destruction of the natural landscape through mass concrete paving along the island's beautiful beach lines. As a result of all these harmful trends combined, the Raizales believe that their traditional ways of life as farmers, fishermen and extraordinary seamen are currently being threatened and that as a people they are on their way to extinction (Raizal report, 2007).

During the visit of the Special Rapporteur to the islands in 2004, representatives of the Raizal communities complained of the political discrimination that they experience through marginalization from decision making processes concerning their territory. They also spoke of the cultural domination and religious aggression that they faced from both mainland Colombians and the Catholic Church who are currently in control of the educational institutions and judicial systems. The exclusive language of instruction is in Spanish while the courts only use English. The economy is in the hands of mainland Colombians who employ very few of the Raizales. The unemployment rate among the indigenous population is estimated at 70% (OHCHR, 2004).

However, despite such challenges the Raizal have remained steadfast in their efforts to maintain their languages and traditions which they see as being predominantly Afro-Caribbean and closer to the culture of the peoples of Central America. In resistance to what they refer to as the neo-colonial oppression of the Colombian state, the Raizal people went as far as to proclaim themselves an independent state in June 2007 (Raizal Independence Declaration, June 2007).