

Kankuamo

Profile

The Kankuamo are one of four indigenous groups that live in the region of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta. Their population is estimated at around 15,000 people and it is one of the indigenous groups which historically had the least contact with outsiders due to their adopted survival strategy of isolation from the 'civilised' world (etniasdecolombia). Today however, along with the Kogui, Arhuaco and Wiwa, the Kankuamo are subject to a process of cultural assimilation and is facing a substantial loss of its unique culture and identity. It is thought that at some point in the foreseeable future with this continuing trend the Kankuamo will eventually become extinct as a people (Fundacion Hemera, 2006).

To date the Kankuamo have been able to maintain their indigenous language of Sánha which belongs to the linguistic family of Chibcha (www.etniasdecolombia.org).

Just like the majority of Colombia's indigenous groups the Kankuamo are a highly spiritual people who pay great reverence to the forces of nature. They are guided by the law of origin or '*ley de origen*' which they regard as being the traditional ancestral science of wisdom and knowledge which manages all that is material and spiritual. The adherence to this law is what guarantees the order and permanence of life, of the universe, and the Kankuamo as an indigenous people. The law of origin regulates the relationships between all living beings from the stones of the earth to humankind itself and tells them that *Umunukunu* or Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is the sacred place given to the tribes of Iku, Kaggaba, Sanka y Kankuama. The orders received from the first fathers stated that from the Sierra they will be the guardians of the world with the responsibility to guard the permanence of all forms of life so that there will be continuing equilibrium and harmony between nature and humankind, being also that man is nature (OIK, Hoja de Cruz ,2006).

Historical context

Since the middle of the 1980s the Kankuamos have been engaged in a process social and political organization which resulted in the creation of the OIK (Indigenous Organisation of Kankuamos) in 1993. 10 years later in 2003 through resolution number 12 of INCORA the first Kankuamo reservation was created on the south eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada in the municipality of Valledupar (Fundacion Hemera, 2006).

For 20 years as a result of the absence of the Colombian state, Kankuamo territory was invaded and occupied by both leftist and right wing illegal armed groups who established systems of social and judicial control in the 1980s and 1990s serving to damage and undermine traditional indigenous authorities and systems of governance. In addition, as a result of disputes for territorial control intermingled with the trade in narcotics, the Kankuamos found themselves frequently caught up in the midst of the cross-fire between warring parties.

With the retreat of the leftist guerrillas from the Sierra Nevada and the consolidation of paramilitary

gains and occupation in 1999, the Kankuamos became subject to unfounded accusations of involvement in or collaboration with the guerilla insurgency. Such politically and economically motivated accusations were often accompanied by alarming acts of violence with the calculated intention of planting terror and pushing the indigenous communities off their lawfully recognized lands.

During this illegal occupation by the various paramilitary groups of the AUC, who at times acted in collusion with the Colombian army, communities became victim to forced displacement, selective assassinations, massacres, forced disappearances, threats, confinement and forced recruitment into the illegal armed groups. Such grievous violations of the Kankuamos collective and individual human rights wrought negatives consequences in virtually all spheres of their lives. These included the loss of sacred sites and places of worship, the significant weakening of traditional indigenous authorities, the breakdown of processes of cultural recuperation and economic self-sufficiency, together with the destruction of the fragile ecosystems of the Sierra Nevada, declared by UNESCO in 1979 as a world biosphere reserve.

The gravity of such violence perpetrated against the Kankuamos especially by the armed forces which included extrajudicial executions of indigenous civilians whose bodies were later discovered dressed in military uniform and deaths presented as being killed in combat, led the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) in 2003 and 2004, to urge the Colombian government to adopt specific measures to preserve the life and personal integrity of members of the Kankuamo community. Such measures were also required to guarantee the respect of the Kankuamo cultural identity and the special relationship with their ancestral territories. The state was also urged to deliver the necessary humanitarian aid to the victims of forced displacement and to carry out an investigation into the violence and threats waged against the community (Fundacion Hemera, 2006).

However despite such demands on the part of the CIDH, in the 2004 report of the United Nations Rapporteur on Indigenous rights, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, denounced the continuing ethnic cleansing, genocide and ethnocide being perpetrated against the Kankuamo community despite appeals to the Colombian state by the CIDH and the Human Rights Ombudsman to adopt urgent measures to the protect them.

Current situation

Militarization of ancestral lands

Between 2003 - 2006 there was a decline in the number of reported individual human rights violations committed against the Kankuamos (Fundacion Hemera, 2006). The reasons behind this decline presented by various government departments, including the Presidential Programme for Human Rights, have ranged from increased attempts to maintain better dialogue between the state and indigenous communities, to reinforced government support to local social welfare organizations, to the simultaneous increase of the counter-guerrilla troops within and around indigenous reservations. Increased military operations with the support of peasant soldiers and the strengthening of the network of informants are also cited as reasons behind the decline (Ibid).

While some members of the community point to the fact that there has been an improvement to their sense of personal security, they point out that other forms of human rights violations are omitted from the statistics. For example, these include an increase in the human rights violations committed against the communities by the Colombian army itself, which has been explained by the state officials as being the result of the lack of understanding among soldiers on issues relating to human rights and the special laws governing indigenous peoples, ancestral lands, authorities and sacred sites (ibid).

Fundacion Hemera, a local Colombian human rights organisation, denounce the army's flagrant flouting of international humanitarian law through the setting up of 'home and camp' directly within or on sacred sites. The network of informants set up to gather intelligence on guerrilla movements and activity is similarly denounced as being a vehicle through which the military involves the civilian population within the conflict, often through the use of coercive means, including the levying of accusations against leaders and individuals of being in collaboration with the guerrilla, or the use of emotional blackmail urging individuals to join the network as a demonstration of 'social solidarity' with their communities.

The militarization of the reservations has also seen an increase in the level of sexual violence committed against indigenous women by army personnel and the phenomenon of forced displacement as a collective violation of human rights remains as yet an issue to be officially quantified and resolved. According to OIK as a result of the paramilitary incursion carried out in 2000 to date there are still 400 Kankuamo families who remain displaced and this is evidenced by the many houses within the reservation which remain abandoned (ibid).

Despite this increased military presence many indigenous people are still in fear that the guerilla or paramilitary groups will return, and there have been reports of the presence of newly demobilized ex-paramilitary splinter groups in the region who according to statistics were responsible for 48% of the crimes perpetrated between 2003-2006 CHECK (Fundacion Hemera, 2006).

In August of 2007, the leader of the 'Martires de Cesar', the paramilitary wing of the AUC operating in the department of Cesar was captured by the special forces of the Colombian Technical Investigation Body (CTI). Famously known as '*El Paisa*', Leonardo Enrique Sanchez Barbosa, is accused of being responsible for the killings of up to 200 kankuamos during the paramilitary reign of terror he commanded for 10 years. '*El Paisa*' will now face up to 60 years in jail due to his refusal to demobilize which would have meant he would have only faced a maximum term of 8 years in prison for confessing to his crimes under the amnesty granted by the controversial Justice and Peace law (El Tiempo, 03/08/07).

Mega projects

Just like many other indigenous communities in Colombia the Kankuamo see the preservation of their ancestral territories as being under threat from proposals for large scale state-led development projects which carry the potential of seriously disrupting their traditional ways of living, and destroying the spiritual basis of their identity and existence.

Partly funded through the National Development Plan for Development for the period 2002-2006 the government has taken steps to introduce multiple infrastructural development projects which will include the exploitation of the Sierra Nevada's natural resources and the building of hydroelectric plants and dams. Implementation of these plans will involve the re-canalization of rivers and the flooding of hundreds of acres of indigenous lands, and the exploitation of natural resources. Other projects included within this plan include the construction of huge complexes and cable car systems for the benefits of 'eco' and 'ethno' tourism.

In a meeting carried out between Fundacion Hemera and state authorities of the department of Cesar in July 2006, the Secretary General of the department committed to ensuring that the process of prior consultation with the Kankuamo community would be carried out before the initiation of the construction of the dam. However, the Kankuamo have stated their categorical opposition to all proposed development activities in their ancestral territories due to their belief that the Sierra Nevada is the heart and beginning of all existence, and that's its destruction would not only cause irreparable damage to the natural equilibrium of the region but would also have dire repercussions for their

autonomy and authority.

The Kankuamo fear their lack of access to information on the proposed megaprojects, coupled with the militarization of reservations and the re-emergence of paramilitary splinter groups will lead in the future to a violent attack against them as a means to provoke the displacement and destabilization of their communities. This in turn will open the opportunity for the mass exploitation of the Sierra Nevada's natural resources (Fundacion Hemera, 2006).

Incarceration

Other serious issues currently affecting the Kankuamo peoples relate to their treatment within the criminal justice system once they have been taken into custody or imprisoned. There are reports of mass detentions which often lead to the release of indigenous peoples after a few days for the lack of any evidence found against them. Those who remain detained are said to be held in prisons with 'sub-human' conditions, and many indigenous detainees develop illnesses due to the inability or unwillingness of the authorities to provide them with food which meet their traditional dietary requirements. Indigenous people are also denied of keeping symbolic items which are imbued with cultural or spiritual meaning (Fundacion Hemera, 2006).