

Cries from the Forests

“Our God hears the cry of the poor.” Do we?

This reflection on the poor in Colombia is a September 5, 2009, Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) net release, The Communal Forest of Las Pavas Continues to Be Destroyed, by Eloy Garcia, a CPT member; it is used with permission.

On August 21, [2009] members of Christian Peacemaker Teams visited the displaced community of Las Pavas and, accompanied by members of the community, viewed firsthand the continual destruction of the communal forest once used for wood gathering, hunting, and fishing. The forest lies about a two-hour walk outside the township of Buenos Aires, where the displaced families are living. During their visit to the forest, the CPTers could hear the noise of the power saws and bulldozers clearing the forest around them.

The work continues daily. Teams of campesino contract employees from other communities work swiftly, cutting huge old-growth trees with chain saws and clearing paths for the encroaching bulldozers. The plan is to clear cut the area, then de-stump and burn all the residue, and then plant all the cleared land with oil palm. Within two to three years the oil palm trees will



begin to produce fruit which can be converted into agro-fuels used in the global north. A popular refrain among social activists is: “la palma aceitera llenando tanques en el norte y desplazando comunidades en el sur.” “Palm oil trees filling gas tanks in the north and displacing communities in the south.”

As they visited the land with the CPTers, members of the Las Pavas community picked up a few ears of corn remaining after the bulldozers had razed much of lot 5, once the area where Don Efrain planted corn. They identified other lots, but noted how little remains of their simple dwellings and crops. Even though the land claim is under pending litigation, the judge’s controversial order allows the palm industry contractors to occupy and clear cut the land.

Community members are not even allowed to collect the felled trees for firewood or to sell as timber. Contract employers are under orders to burn everything, adding further waste and insult to the poverty stricken families of Las Pavas, who watch their forest disappear daily before their eyes.

The lack of overhead tree cover is also changing the local ecosystem. Lush lagoons formerly filled with fish and serving as havens for wildlife are now drying



up from the intense daytime heat and lack of shade. Local fauna has all but disappeared, heading further inland towards the mountains while their once sprawling habitat continually diminishes.

In Las Pavas, CPTers encountered a squad of Colombian National Army soldiers from the Nariño Battalion, who are encamped on the lands to protect the palm company’s contract employees. We were told that some employees with known links to paramilitaries are also present. Their presence is further evidence of what CPT has already witnessed: that the Colombian national government, through the use of military and paramilitary groups, supports and assists large transnational companies in the displacement of indigenous peoples and campesinos in order to acquire the peoples’ land. Placing profit before people is evident in Las Pavas, as the scandalous destruction of communal forest continues under the protective watch of Colombian national soldiers, supported by U.S. government financing.

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