

Indigenous March for Peace - Just 100 Kms of a Long Road

Constanza Vieira

Inter Press Service

September 20, 2004

CALI, Colombia, Sep 20 (IPS) - "We know bad things could happen, even on our way back to our territories after this (mobile) congress," indigenous leader Feliciano Valencia told IPS in the southern Colombian city of Cali at the end of a 100-km march "for life, justice, happiness, freedom and autonomy", described as the biggest indigenous demonstration in the history of Colombia.

The Nasa (more widely known as Páez) Indians and other participants -- including afro-Colombians, peasant farmers and trade unionists -- began to return home on Sunday. Valencia was referring to the dangers faced by activists and protesters in war-torn Colombia.

The march originally set out on Tuesday, Sep. 14 from the city of Santander de Quilichao, reaching Cali, the capital of the southwestern department (province) of Valle del Cauca on Saturday, Sep. 18.

The march was planned by the seven indigenous communities of the neighbouring department of Cauca, which stretches from the Andes mountains in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and is the ancestral home of the well-organised Nasa community.

The march was organised as a "minga" -- an indigenous word for an ancestral practice of communities joining efforts towards a common goal -- for life and against Colombia's four-decade armed conflict, which pits the government forces and right-wing paramilitaries against leftist guerrillas.

Indigenous people -- the country's 90 different native groups account for around two percent of the population of 43 million -- are frequently targeted by the warring factions, or are caught in the crossfire, and the marchers were demanding that their autonomy and neutrality in the war be respected, and that the armed groups stay out of their "resguardos" (reserves).

The Nasa people, who have a long tradition in participatory municipal government and development planning, for which they have won international awards like the United Nations Development Programme's Equator Prize this year, have been at the forefront of the struggle for recovery of indigenous rights over their traditional territory and passive resistance to the various armed factions.

The march was a call for "peoples, organisations and popular processes" to establish a permanent mobile "people's congress" that will begin its sessions in the 140-hectare indigenous reserve of La María in the department of Cauca.

The mobilisation was supported by parallel demonstrations in other cities, organised by indigenous people, trade unionists, and movements opposed to right-wing President Alvaro Uribe, who according to the polls remains hugely popular after two years of strong-arm

government.

When the marchers reached the Coliseo del Pueblo (the stadium) in Cali at 11:00 on Thursday morning, there were 65,000 participants, who were joined by 5,000 members of the Regional Indigenous Organisation of Valle del Cauca.

The indigenous people "are the only social sector capable of mobilising such a great number of people during so many days, and walking besides," sociologist and writer Alfredo Molano told IPS.

"This ratifies our work towards a political pact between indigenous peoples and social organisations, and towards a national agenda with which we will go out and traverse the country," said indigenous activist Valencia.

Valencia is the human rights coordinator for the Association of Indigenous Councils of the Northern Cauca (ACIN), an organisation founded 12 years ago, that links 112,000 indigenous people in 16 reserves (covering a total of 179,000 hectares), one of which is La María.

Taking part in creating the broad new political pact are "teachers, the labour movement in Cali and a few trade unions from the rest of the country, Afro-Colombians, small businesses and micro-enterprises, especially in petty commerce, textiles and dairy products, women's groups, organised street vendors and many peasant farmers," said Valencia.

Despite their exhaustion, some 1,500 marchers danced late into the night on Thursday to Caribbean rhythms played by the band "Los Fascinantes".

In the meantime, entire families slept on the grass, in improvised shelters set up under the leafy trees of the 10,000-square-metre grounds of the stadium in the tropical heat of Cali, one of Colombia's biggest cities.

Others stretched out in the passageways and stands of the stadium, next to clothes hanging from lines. As they slept, they were watched over by hundreds of indigenous guards armed only with decorated staffs representing their authority, who were in charge of keeping the march orderly, peaceful and safe.

President Uribe criticised the march, which he accused of having a hidden political agenda. "Tell the truth, say you have a political party, and that you want to march and protest," said the president, who in the past has accused human rights activists of fomenting terrorism.

The indigenous groups responded in a communique summing up the reasons underlying the "minga" or mobile congress, which stopped to hold sessions in each town it passed through.

"Of course our Minga is Political with a capital P, because defending indigenous and collective rights is political; rejecting the dismantling of the social structures of the state of law is political; defending indigenous lands and their autonomous government is political," said the statement.

”Opposing the free trade agreement (being negotiated with the United States) is political; rejecting the murders, forced disappearances, forced displacement, violence and war is political; dissenting with the (government’s) so-called democratic security is political; defending the gains we won in the (1991) constitution, other legislation and life is political; defending life and dignity is political,” it added.

The ”democratic security” policy, the Uribe administration’s banner project, is aimed at drawing civilians into supporting the military in a counterinsurgency war that pits the state forces and right-wing paramilitaries against left-wing guerrillas, and has become steadily more violent over the past four decades.

A package of proposed constitutional amendments that the government has sent to parliament seeks to limit the power and authority of the Constitutional Court, make Uribe’s re-election possible, and cut social entitlements, among other measures opposed by indigenous, human rights, social and labour activists.

”The constitutional counter-reforms that Uribe is trying to push through could lead to the loss of our land once again to the state,” Valencia told IPS.

The 1991 constitution, approved as part of a peace agreement with the former guerrilla organisation-turned political party M-19, recognises the jurisdiction of traditional indigenous authorities over their ancestral territories, demarcated in reserves.

The Nasa and other indigenous people who held the march also fear that a free trade treaty that Colombia (along with Peru and Ecuador) is negotiating with Washington will limit or put an end to recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights over their land, and will pave the way for transnational corporations ”to install themselves in our communities to carry out mega-projects,” said Valencia.

”We are calling for a national referendum for the people to say whether or not they agree” with the proposed free trade deal, he said.

”The issue should be broadly debated, and even the most illiterate must learn what the free trade treaty is about, and after that, the people should be the ones to decide,” he argued.

”The humanitarian crisis in some indigenous regions is not a new thing. The persecution, abuses and killings have been going on since 1971, when we began our organised struggle to recover our rights,” the activist explained.

”The landowners organised their (armed) security groups, which back then we called ’pájaros’ (birds), and later, when those groups were not enough, the police and army got involved,” he said.

”In 32 years, we lost around 980 ’compañeros’ in the process of recovering our land. They were killed by the ’pájaros’ and by members of the police and the national army. That total, which we calculated in 2000, does not include extrajudicial executions, or politically motivated killings,

disappearances or threats,” he said.

There are now 72 Colombian indigenous leaders living in exile, mainly in Europe. The rest have taken refuge in other countries of Latin America. The largest number of leaders living in exile are from the Nasa community, followed by the U'was and Yanaconas.

”The Nasas, because we have been the most insistent in demanding respect for our rights; the U'was because they live in oil-producing zones of Colombia; and the Yanaconas because their lands are in the valleys and basins of the Estrella Hidrográfica (Hydrographic Star),” an area of the Andean mountains where the country's four main rivers are born, said Valencia.

The participants in the march plan to create ”popular mechanisms” to demand a negotiated solution to the armed conflict. They will also set up a tribunal to try human rights violations against members of their communities.

Valencia said he was well aware that the indigenous activists face dangers, and might even run into trouble on the way home from Cali.

The shamans (traditional indigenous healers) have said that many people ”will not live to see what was built. But they also warn that if indigenous people fail to struggle, that will be the end. Fulfil the mandate, said the shamans,” he added, referring to a ”mandate” adopted by the minga .

”We will have to lose many of our brothers and sisters in order for our children to be able to see this world we are building. The warning of the shamans is the last word. But that does not make us afraid; it encourages us to continue forward,” said Valencia.

”In this (mobile) congress there are many young people, and they are convinced that if one falls, the rest must take up the banner and continue on,” he concluded.

None of the warring factions are pleased with the indigenous peoples' autonomy. The elderly and those who were unable to take part in the march stayed behind in the reserves, guarded by a group of young men, because the leftist rebels had threatened to seize the indigenous territories if the people left to take part in the march.

Early this month, five indigenous leaders, including Arquímedes Vitonás, mayor of the town of Toribío in Cauca, were kidnapped by the main insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

But they were rescued when several hundred members of the unarmed indigenous guard and others marched to the spot where the community leaders were being held, and successfully demanded their release. (END/2004)