

“Neither the guerrillas nor the government consider us a political actor”

Interview with the General Secretary of the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC), Luis Fernando Arias

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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On Wednesday 18th of February, we held a telephone conversation with the General Secretary of ONIC, Mr Luis Fernando Arias about the massacre in which an indeterminate number of indigenous of the Awá tribe in Nariño, south-east Colombia, which was carried out by the “Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia –Army of the People” (FARC-EP). This latest act of violence against the indigenous population attests once more to the degree of degradation which the social and armed conflict has reached in Colombia. With brutal authoritarianism, there have been massacres of people denounced as “informers”, who were only defenceless members of a population which days earlier had been attacked by the Colombian army, forced to give information about the area and about the presence of insurgents. The Awá community is thus incorporated forcefully by the armed actors in its territory into a conflict which they don’t feel a part of, violated such is the principle of indigenous autonomy.

The media, which conspiratorially silences the systematic violations of indigenous communities on the part of the State and especially the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, also have the blood of the Awá on their hands – they have used this massacre as another element in their war propaganda. A game for which neither the indigenous nor the ONIC asked. In a clear declaration read at a press conference on the 12th of February, Luis Evelis Andrade, Chief Adviser of the ONIC, stated:

“Those who murdered the Awá are not only the FARC. The National Army, the police and the paramilitaries have also brought terror to this community. From September 2008 till 2009, there have been 44 murders and massacres of indigenous Awá. In the first 43 days of this year there have been 58 murders of our brothers in the national territory. In the last seven years there have been 1,303 murders of indigenous in Colombia, a figure which could grow given that many are not announced for fear of retaliation.” He recommends also that the government “no longer lies to the international community with respect to the acts of war – bombings, fumigations and machine-gunnings in territories of the Awá. (As well as) abstaining from publicising

the fact that Democratic Security guarantees and protects the life of the indigenous communities.”¹.

The Association of the Indigenous Councils of Norte del Cauca, who were the main protagonists of the heroic “Minga” of Indigenous and Popular Resistance, which shook Colombia in October and November of last year, announced in a declaration with a graphic title “Why did they massacre the Awá?” about the antecedents of the massacre and the vested interests at play in this region. It concludes categorically:

“This is not a problem of the Awá, it is not a problem of the indigenous, it’s not a crime against a community in Nariño. This is an act of terror which is a part of the accelerated implementation of policies leading to dispossession through the means of death. This is Plan Colombia in action. An economic megaproject that delivers and integrates our territories and lives to the greed of global capital.

Before so much horror, so evident, we cannot continue to look on from afar or wait our turn. It is time to know why they were killed, why they kill us and take us into detention. It is time to reject once and for all the horror which the FARC commits in the name of the people, as we reject that of the regime.

It is also painfully evident that it is of little use before this State to have lands, to denounce violations of human rights or to negotiate with an illegitimate government when the model of development with its treaties and laws which serve terror, coming from wherever to massacre, displace and to dispossess. It is vitally important to resist this model in its entirety and as a priority. In these conditions and before these awful acts, it is necessary to recognise that all the rest, even the electoral system, must urgently abide by an agenda of mobilisation and action in the Minga which resists and stops the accelerating course of dispossession of which this massacre is a part.

We call the Social and Communal Minga. We will mark the agenda to resist the model of death which comes with the TLC, with the laws of dispossession, terror, with broken agreements, with the absence of a fabric of the communities for liberty. We dedicate ourselves in Minga to stop the horror of the FARC, the State and all the armed groups in Nariño and Colombia. To support the Awá community and to defend with them their territory and to defend life and our territories from this death, knowing that it advances continually accumulating.”²

The 20th of February, the ONIC pointed at a new communiqué which before the disappearance of the bodies of the massacred Awá called a Humanitarian Minga to find the bodies. Enough time until Monday the 23th of February at 18:00 for the FARC-EP to bring back the bodies, this demand is also directed at the national government, which has troops in the zone. The communiqué concludes by once more demanding the demilitarisation of the Awá territory and the withdrawal of all the armed actors, “legal and illegal”. For their part, they insist that the insurgents recognise the indigenous autonomy and that the government don’t take this opportunity to pressurise the Awá to “collaborate” as part of its warlike strategy.³ (Uribe at the moment is in Nariño and is

¹ www.onic.org.co

² www.nasaacin.org

³ www.onic.org.co

threatening the zone with great military pressure, which will have the effect of aggravating the humanitarian crisis of the Awá).

We reproduce below the interview with the General Secretary of the ONIC, Luis Fernando Arias, about the grave problem of the Awá community. We also talk regarding the current situation in Colombia from the perspective of the indigenous movement, a situation which is marked by the worsening of the conflict in reservation zones and the intensification of the strategy of dispossession and massive displacement.

Dear Luis Fernando, can you tell us what has happened to the Awá in Nariño?

What has happened isn't temporary; it is something that's being coming for a while. We could say that it is the Chronicle of an Announced Death. We came to denounce for a long time, the Defence, the ONIC, UNIPA, the system of Early Warnings, which had risked a lot in this zone. Yet they still did not adopt urgent measures for individual and collective protection.

Here there is a strategy, on the part of the armed actors, to get the civilian population involved in the conflict. On the one hand, there's the Army which accuses us of not cooperating and on the other hand, there is the FARC which accuses us of being informers. Nevertheless the Awá have retained a firm attitude in defence of their territory, autonomy based on the agreements and laws of origin.

The total dehumanisation of the conflict has brought about today that this massacre could be wrought on the Awá people. We have read the justifications of the FARC but we reject them. We have called on all the actors to stop involving our peoples in the conflict and that they demilitarise the territories. The response that we have received has been of a military character, together with threats and displacements.

This atrocious crime must be seen in an integrated and historical manner as the result of a series of violations which succeed one another in a systemic manner. A public prosecutor claims that they are trying to get the Awá to cooperate with them, but we have spent five years trying to get them to listen to us.

What is the reason for this zone being such an acute space of conflict?

This zone is a strategic corridor, since it is on the Ecuadorian border and has a route to the sea. Therefore its control is fundamental for two types of traffic, the trafficking of arms and the trafficking of drugs. Because of this there is a paramilitary presence and also a guerrilla and an army presence. The geographical conditions are also very inhospitable and all of this aids the war situation.

We read the communiqué of the Mariscal Sucre Column of the FARC-EP and they recognise only 8 deaths, in circumstances where the media talked of 27 deaths came to light... What is this substantial divergence due to?

On 6th February the Awá comrades initially announced that there had been 17 deaths. Later an indigenous leader stated that there had been 10 more deaths afterwards. These pieces of information could not be verified due to the current conditions in the zone. Our information, what we have been able to verify for the moment, shows that the second massacre could not have happened. It still hasn't been able to enter, but preliminary information seemed to confirm that the second massacre did not happen.

The FARC communiqué doesn't mention two women who were murdered inside this group. Maybe there have been 10 of these deaths that have been confirmed up until now. But there are seven disappearances that were taken with the group, whose whereabouts we do not know nor whether they've been executed. Therefore we demand that they be returned, those who were taken along with the others. This is the information that we have at the moment.

We see that the government has been hurried into making political strategies of this situation, insisting that the communities “co-operate” with the armed forces and with the “democratic security”, to exert pressure through a major militarisation of the reservations... What position does the indigenous movement have with regard to this situation?

The Colombian indigenous movement has been consistent in denouncing the Democratic Security policy of Uribe Vélez. This is nothing more than a policy of death and terror. We have had, during his period in government, 1,300 indigenous people murdered. This is an incontrovertible figure, corroborated by national, international and independent organisations. This signifies that, with this government, an indigenous person is being murdered every second day. This was recognised by the United Nations' spokesman, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, who in 2004 affirmed that a process of ethnocide and genocide is being carried out in Colombia. This is a result of the deepening of the war as a result of the Democratic Security policy, precisely. If the government had been looking for peace there would have been other responses, of a political nature. But the indiscriminate response of a military nature claims its principle victims from among civilians.

We told Mr Uribe not to come to point out that the policy of Democratic Security is a policy that benefits the indigenous people. Therefore we have demanded he dismantle these policies... this is what we are setting out through the Minga, so we are seeking total demilitarisation. Because the war is not taking place in the Ubérrimo (the hacienda of President Uribe), but in our own reservations. The deaths are our own, they are indigenous people.

Also we say to the insurgency that situations such as this cannot be part of a revolutionary project. That is how they are imitating the government, they imitate their warlike, authoritarian policies. The basic problem is that neither the guerillas nor the government consider us as a political actor, they see us more as a nuisance. Our posture is definitive around autonomy and this fact hinders their models.

The government blames the indigenous movement for acting within a double discourse: on the one hand they ask for State protection, but on the other, they demand autonomy and demilitarisation from it... What do they hope to get from the State regarding the question of security for the communities?

What this government doesn't understand is that protection isn't about having soldiers or bullet-proof vests. What we ask is that it respects and strengthens the requests for self-defence, that is, the Indigenous Guards. We speak of the help for our plans of life and permanency, of territory and lands, we speak of our culture. We insist in this last aspect that the most important to guarantee our protection is the respect of our autonomy, the respect of our values and world view, of our culture, and that we are not trying to get involved in a conflict that does not belong to us.

You refer to bringing about a Humanitarian Minga on the part of the indigenous people. Could you explain this to us?

Continuing the idea of the Minga (ie, the concept of collective effort, directed in this case to highlighting the human rights issues of indigenous peoples through their own active mobilisa-

tion) which was started at the end of 2008, this would be a Humanitarian Minga involving human rights organisations, to distinct expressions of solidarity, to the Indigenous Guards, to popular organisations. The most important thing is to send a strong, clear message that the Awá are not alone and that by means of the solidarity of our community is how we construct an organisation of permanent protection.

In the days before the massacre there had been gestures on the part of *Colombianos y Colombianas por la Paz* (Colombians for Peace, CCpP) who put forward the possibility of a Humanitarian Accord to humanise the conflict. How do you see this development being affected by what has happened in Nariño?

What has happened polarises the parties. What we believe is that the war will become more profound, and this comes always accompanied by the stigmatisation and persecution of the popular organisations and of civil society. The deepening of the war will create complicated scenarios for the indigenous people and for the CCpP.

What we are trying to do therefore is to redouble our efforts from the popular world, from the actors belonging to civil society, in order to get the parties to come together, to put pressure on peace dialogues but peace dialogues which are participatory, inclusive and long lasting.

We will continue to fight for a negotiated exit from the conflict which implies various compromises to the armed actors: a cease-fire, Humanitarian Accord, concrete points for the agenda of political negotiation... This is our hope, but we are conscious of the fact that the state of affairs at the moment doesn't present many political conditions for these hopes to materialise. What is happening is a worsening of the conflict, in which the population will be the cannon fodder, so we can expect more false positives⁴ and more executions of indigenous.

In this complicated scenario, what is the role of the indigenous movement of Colombia?

For example, we have now subscribed to a political agreement between various Colombian organisations and some from Washington. We call it the "Group of Washington." It's a way to see how the bilateral scene works to explore peaceful ways out. The central axis of this agreement is peace, but this also constitutes itself from certain common political criteria. We have drafted a letter to Obama, in our intention to generate a direct dialogue regarding the situation of peace in Colombia.

Tomorrow we will deliver this letter to the embassy and we will have a press conference in which we will argue that this conflict of more than five decades must be resolved by the Colombians themselves. The dialogue with Obama will try to introduce peace as opposed to militarisation. We know that Obama is trying to change certain points of the Bush policy. Therefore we believe that there are possibilities in order to change in a certain manner the policy towards Colombia: fundamentally, Plan Colombia. We will explain to him about the search for peace, we have certain reservations regarding the scenario, as there are circumstances which we must observe carefully, but we look forward to the response.

Another scenario is also that in the present circumstances we support what the CCpP is seeking. Which means that we cannot resign ourselves to the military solution. We believe it to be vitally important to get agreements in social and political order.

⁴ *False Positives: a term which refers to Army staged results in order to swell their military successes, ranging from staged bomb attacks to the actual killing of civilians that are then reported as "guerrillas killed in combat". We have already written a lengthy article on this issue: "Los Falsos Positivos: los horrores de una guerra mediática" www.anarkismo.net

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Interview with the General Secretary of ONIC, Luis Fernando Arias, on the delicate situation of the Awá people. We also talked on the current Colombian political scenario, signaled by the intensification of the conflict in the indigenous territories and of the strategy of plunder through mass displacement, from the point of view of indigenous people and in relation to their own role as a political force.

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