Indigenous Conflict Victims and the Growing Tent City in Bogotá

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Carlos Fernando (name changed), 30 years old, stares at the fire in front of his tent in Bogotá's Olaya Herrera national park, a public park in the center of Colombia's capital. Carlos is a member of the Emberá, an indigenous group of about 80,000 that live in Colombia and Panama. In mid-November, he arrived with his wife and three children, aged between two and ten, in Bogotá and joined a camp where 1,400 Emberá, among them more than 500 children, dozens of pregnant women, and multiple elderly have gathered since late September. Here, along the buzzing Séptima, one of the city's main North-South arteries, next to the Javeriana, a costly private university, and the city's banking district, the Emberá have erected a city of improvised tents, often without mattresses to sleep. Where city dwellers usually enjoy the park on sunny days, the smell of fire, clothes drying in the wind, and children running between the tents now dominate the scene.

Most of the residents originally come from Chocó, a department in Western Colombia bordering the pacific ocean. The region is one of Colombia's least developed and most impoverished areas. Yet, the main reason why the Emberá came to Bogotá is the continued violence in rural Colombia. 'Men in hoods told us to leave, or our lives would be in danger,' Carlos Fernando says. While he doesn't know the men's identity, they likely pertained to one of the multiple armed groups, which fight for control in Chocó over lucrative illegal mines, coca cultivation fields, and corresponding trafficking corridors.

The displacement of indigenous people from their lands has been a reality in Colombia for some time. With the beginning of the *Conquista*, the Spanish colonialization of the Americas in the 16th century, those indigenous surviving imported diseases and massacres were continuously deprived of their ancestral lands to gain space for agricultural production. Colonial and later Colombian settlers pushed them away from agriculturally fruitful areas towards marginal mountain ranges or the Amazonas. Those who stayed often had to enter a feudal-like servant system, including the payment of *Terrajes*, gratis work for landowners in exchange for being allowed to live on and cultivate small plots of land.

Colombia's armed internal conflict since the 1960s further intensified violence against indigenous people. Particularly heavy weighted the emergence of right-wing paramilitary groups which terrorized rural Colombia since the 1980s. Often in alliances with large landowners, local and national politicians, and state authorities, paramilitaries conducted brutal massacres and disappearances among Colombia's rural and indigenous population to firm landowners' grasp on lands and cut down social protests. Frequently, the so achieved land concentration led to agricultural monocultures of sugar cane, palm trees, or bananas or enabled illegal economies such as coca cultivation.

Besides public services in their current camp, such as medical assistance, the Emberá in Bogotá's national park demand that the government secures the return to their lands or grants them access to fruitful and safe land elsewhere. While hundred thirty families in a similar camp outside Bogotá have agreed to return to their territories, the district authorities have offered the national park Emberá only a transfer to other temporary locations within Bogotá. 'We are three different groups of Emberá here in the park, Chamí, Catío, and Dobidá, and internal rivalries complicate demanding our rights from the government,' says Carlos Fernando. Meanwhile, government officials claim that the Emberá are unwilling to negotiate and do not allow the authorities to enter the camp. At least, the

camp's visibility in the middle of Bogotá contributes to a growing awareness among the wider population. The tragic death of a 21-month old Emberá child in the park last week further stimulated coverage by the national press, elevating pressure on the authorities to address the situation.

'The situation in the park is a disgrace for the Colombian state,' argues Sebastian Vega, a musician in his 40s and a nearby resident. 'In this country, the economic interests of a few drive the government's course of action,' he adds. The absence of state presence in the park is indeed striking. A team of social workers hired by Bogotá's mayor office is present but lacks the authority and resources to intervene meaningfully. 'The national government and the local authorities shift the responsibility on each other,' Mr. Vega adds. The park administration has opened the park's public sanitary facilities for the Emberá, but those are utterly insufficient given the large group of people.

The Emberá in the park depend primarily on food and medicine donations. 'On days without sufficient donations, we suffer from hunger,' explains Carlos Fernando. The modest income they achieve from selling artisanal jewelry and begging in Bogotá's city center is barely enough to buy wood to make fire and keep warm during the rainy and cold Bogotá nights with temperatures frequently below ten degrees Celsius. Some have therefore begun to chop down the trees in the park.

Even if the government concedes to the Emberá demands, substantial change is unlikely. On paper, Colombia has agreed on multiple occasions to elevate the living conditions of its 1.5 million indigenous population, which besides the Emberá, includes various other groups. Colombia's 1991 constitution recognizes the country's cultural and ethnic diversity. Also in 1991, Colombia ratified the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, a key international instrument to guarantee the rights of indigenous people. Also in response to the numerous massacres among the indigenous population through paramilitary groups, Colombia recognized state responsibility for all conflict victims and signed agreements for their reconciliation in 2011.

Yet, the state rarely fulfilled these promises in practice, and the marginalized living conditions of indigenous communities in Colombia persist. International bodies such as the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights have criticized the Colombian state for not meeting reparation promises to the indigenous communities. Their poverty rate of 59.6 in 2019 is higher than that of any other population group, and indigenous communities frequently lack access to education and healthcare. While violence against any social activists in Colombia soars, indigenous leaders are the most frequent target, with 83 killed only in 2019, of which most perpetrators remained unidentified.

Also, the 2016 Colombian peace deal with the FARC, formerly Latin America's largest guerrilla group, did not improve the communities' protection. The power vacuum left by the demobilized FARC often implied that other criminal groups entered rural territories to contest for control. Attracted through high rents, successors of paramilitary units, remaining guerrilla groups such as the National Liberation Army, and dissidents of the FARC demobilization process frequently seek control over lucrative illicit economies. While before 2016, the FARC's territorial control implied a certain level of stability, the unclear balance of power nowadays leads to intensified violence dynamics. Consequently, the killings of indigenous leaders have increased.

The tent city in Bogotá's national park and similar collection ponds across Colombia thus keep growing. It is unlikely that government promises in response to the death of the 21-month-old will alter the situation. The Colombian state and society have demonstrated their unwillingness to challenge the status quo too often. More structural change in rural Colombia would be required to sustainably alter the security and socio-economic situation of the indigenous communities. Until then, the daily struggle in the heart of Bogotá goes on.

About the author:

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