

Massacres and Paramilitary Land Seizures in Colombia

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Armed groups in Colombia are driving peasants off their land to make way for plantations of palm oil, a biofuel that is being promoted as an environmentally friendly source of energy.

Surging demand for “green” fuel has prompted rightwing paramilitaries to seize swaths of territory, according to activists and farmers. Thousands of families are believed to have fled a campaign of killing and intimidation, swelling Colombia’s population of 3 million displaced people and adding to one of the world’s worst refugee crises after Darfur and Congo.

Several companies were collaborating by falsifying deeds to claim ownership of the land, said Andres Castro, the general secretary of Fedepalma, the national federation of palm oil producers.

“As a consequence of the development of palm by secretive business practices and the use of threats, people have been displaced and [the businesses] have claimed land for themselves,” he said. His claim was backed up by witnesses and groups such as Christian Aid and the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia.

The revelations tarnish what has been considered an economic and environmental success story. The fruit of the palm oil tree produces a vegetable oil also used in cooking, employs 80,000 people, and is increasingly being turned into biofuel.

“Four years ago Colombia had 172,000 hectares of palm oil,” President Alvaro Uribe told the Guardian. “This year we expect to finish with nearly 400,000.”

“Four years ago Colombia didn’t produce a litre of biofuel. Today, because of our administration, Colombia produces 1.2m litres per day.” Investment in new installations would continue to boost production, he added.

However the lawlessness created by four decades of insurgency in the countryside has enabled rightwing paramilitaries, and also possibly leftwing rebels, to join the boom. Unlike coca, the armed groups’ main income source, palm oil is a legal crop and therefore safe from state-backed eradication efforts.

Farmers who have been forced off their land at gunpoint say that in many cases their banana groves and cattle grazing fields were turned into palm oil plantations. Luis Hernandez (not his real name) fled his 170-hectare plot outside the town of Mutata in Antioquia province nine years ago after his father-in-law and several neighbours were gunned down. When he and other survivors were able to return recently, they found the land was in the hands of a local palm producer.

“The company tells me that it has legal papers for the land, but I don’t know how that can be, as I have land titles dating back 20 years,” said Mr Hernandez. He suspects palm companies collaborated with the paramilitaries. “I don’t know if there was an official agreement between them, but a relationship of some sort definitely exists.”

A government investigation reportedly found irregularities in 80% of palm oil land titles in some areas. “If there have been abuses and the titles are shown to be false, then the land needs to be returned and all the weight of the law needs to be brought down on those that are responsible,” said Dr Castro, of the producers’ association.

Christian Aid is funding an effort to protect peasants who are trying to reclaim land from the paramilitaries, said Dominic Nutt, who has visited the plantations. “It is the dark side of biofuel.”

The paramilitary groups, first formed in the 80s by businessmen, landowners and drug lords to fend off guerrillas, became a powerful illegal army which stole land, sold drugs and massacred civilians. Under a peace deal with the government they have officially disbanded but many observers say remnants remain active.

Displacement continues, with an average of 200,000 cases registered every year over the past four years, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees, with most coming from palm oil-growing areas on the Caribbean coast. “We can’t keep up, they just keep coming,” said Ludiz Ruda, of the Hijos de Maria school in a shantytown outside the coastal city of Cartagena. Since opening last year it had been swamped with impoverished newcomers, she said. “More than 80% are refugees.”

Cocaine output rises regardless

Coca production in Colombia has surged despite US-funded eradication efforts, according to an estimate that casts fresh doubt on Washington’s “war on drugs”. Satellite imagery collated by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy survey suggests that cultivation of coca, the raw ingredient of cocaine, jumped 8% last year to 156,000 hectares.

The estimate was made public before a trip to Washington this week by President Alvaro Uribe. If confirmed, it would be the third consecutive rise in production, and a blow to the US strategy of bolstering Colombia’s security forces to help them destroy the crops.

Under its Plan Colombia project, Washington has funnelled more than \$5bn (£2.5bn) in mostly military aid to its South American ally since 2000 — its biggest aid project outside Afghanistan and the Middle East. The Democrats say the security forces are accused of human rights abuses and complicity with traffickers.

Mr Uribe revealed the unpublished findings in an effort to get the bad news out of the way before he started lobbying Congress; the White House did not immediately respond.

“They told me they were worried about revealing this number because of my upcoming trip to the United States — that the Americans should reveal it,” he said. “But that’s why I’m revealing it. We’re not trying to put makeup on what is a serious matter.”

Plan Colombia began in 1999 and was supposed to halve production of coca within five years, using sprayer planes and officers on the ground. But the latest estimate suggests that since then it has risen 27%.

Last month Mr Uribe trumpeted a UN report that said cultivation was down to 79,000 hectares. The conflicting figures were incomprehensible and disorienting, said the president: “Could it be we’ve worked in vain? That all our work hasn’t produced the desired results?”

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