

Organizing and Protecting: A Narrative from José Soria of the Organization for Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon

By Nataly Fletcher

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José Soria is president of the Organization for Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), which represents 56 indigenous groups from six departments: Amazonas, Caquetá, Putumayo, Guaynía, Guayiare and Vaupes. In these departments live a variety of ethnicities: Tucano, Siriano, Curripaco, Guahibo, Tanimuca, Huitoto, Murui, and many others. The following narration comes from an interview with Soria during the June 2002 International Forum on the Impacts of Fumigations on Crops Typified as "Illicit" and the Armed Conflicts, which OPIAC helped organize.

We wanted to address and analyze the situation that we are experiencing throughout the Colombian Amazon and other border areas where the armed conflict is taking place.

We need to offer alternatives to indigenous communities. Every day, there are more deaths, rapes, kidnappings and displaced people. Also, we must address the aerial herbicide spraying that has been taking place for several years and will start again in July 2002. We believe that both the violence and the spraying have had strong impacts on our territories, affecting the very social make-up of our communities.

Colombia has been at war with insurgents for more than 40 years, but it has never been as intense as it is now. Since the beginning of Plan Colombia, we feel that things have gotten worse on a social level because now there are many more displaced people in our communities, and on an economic level because poverty has increased. The money from Plan Colombia is invested in the military to combat drug trafficking and guerillas. But there is no social investment to improve the quality of life of the indigenous communities.

In the last five years, we have had somewhere around 150,000 people displaced across the Colombian Amazon, not just from Putumayo but also from Cauca, Caldas, and near the banana-growing region. Recently we have seen that their numbers, along with the violence, are increasing.

We think that this is due to Plan Colombia. If Plan Colombia had included a policy or strategy to address development needs of peasant and indigenous communities, we would not see such huge waves of displaced people and the increase in numbers of deaths.

At an international level, we in OPIAC have not only been trying to call attention to these issues by organizing conferences. We have also been making trips to the United States to try and increase awareness among people there so that they can serve as witnesses of what is happening in Colombia. Within Colombia, we have been working with the Public Defender (Defensoría del Pueblo) and U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees on important topics, such as the displaced persons. We have also been working a lot on the issues of human rights violations against indigenous peoples as Colombia is believed to be one of the countries with the highest incidences of violence and the highest rates of human rights violations in the world.

At a national level we are also suing the government over the herbicide spraying and the environmental damages that it causes within our territories. Initially we filed a lawsuit, but process got held up for two months. Then the Council of State ruled against us, because there were national issues that were deemed more important than the local environmental and cultural impacts. It was more of a political ruling than a legal one. Right now we understand the ruling on the matter. I think this time it may turn out to be in our favor. We submitted additional evidence, including medical studies, which showed the negative impacts of the pesticides on human beings. But, if the ruling again goes against us, we will take it to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

We know that the aerial spraying has had a negative impact in two ways. First of all, there is a misconception that the spraying is eradicating the illicit crops. That isn't true. The crops are actually increasing. Once certain areas have been sprayed, the crops are simply shifted to other places. Every time the crops get moved, more rainforest gets cleared. Second, and with regard to health issues, many people are experiencing medical problems that are a direct result of the pesticides. We have also seen many environmental impacts. Our rivers are becoming contaminated, our trees are dying, and entire fields of legal subsistence crops are dying. As an alternative, we have been working with the government on something called manual eradication. We have told them that we do not want forced eradication. Our community members would prefer a method that allows for a gradual removal of illicit crops. We also feel that there must be some social investment so that people can continue to earn a living. The problem with forced eradication of coca crops is that from one day to the next it takes away a source of employment for many families. These people are fieldworkers who live in far-off regions where they have no access to education or health services. It is their only means of survival.

We, the indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon, are willing to participate in manual eradication. We also need the solidarity and support, not only of the indigenous communities of other countries of the Amazon, but also of the people of Colombia, the European community, and the international community as well.

We need them to understand that this is a very difficult situation and that they can help to solve this problem. We believe that if Plan Colombia continues, we will have a huge social crisis on our hands--an increase in displaced people and more deaths. I also believe that a huge number of Amazonian cultures, if they are not prepared, will simply disappear. If things continue the way that they are now in Colombia, we feel that this could turn into a civil war.

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