

Colombia: millions to take to the streets for peace

b Munoz / Source www.redpepper.org.uk / The Dawn News / 26 May 2016. Millions of Colombians will take to the streets this month to demand a different kind of peace with social and environmental justice at its heart.

Colombians are tired of being ignored. They know that if their land, livelihoods, and culture are to be protected, they must be heard. Colombia's President Santos must listen.

Nearly four years into negotiations to bring about an end to Colombia's armed conflict, peace in Colombia has all too often centred on government talks with the two armed insurgency groups, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberación Nacional (ELN), leaving the vast majority of Colombians side-lined and the voices of grassroots social movements silenced.

But on 30 May, millions of Colombians will take to the streets in peaceful protest, to demand a different kind of peace. A 'post-conflict' Colombia on the terms of the state is not enough. The national strike, under the banner of 'The Agrarian, Ethnic, Rural and Popular Minga', will see Colombians from diverse backgrounds making their case for a peace with social and environmental justice at its heart.

The 'Minga' is an ancient call to assemble. Traditionally, indigenous communities from the mountains of the Andes would unite for the harvest season and work collectively to ensure crops were not lost. Today, this age-old practice cuts across the geographical and cultural boundaries of Latin America and says much about the historical moment in which Colombia finds itself: the prospect of peace closer than ever before.

In Colombia, people are not forced from their homes because of war, rather, war is waged for the very purpose of forcing them out.

The human impact of Colombia's 70 year conflict is stark: 220,000 people dead; thousands disappeared; and many more victims of sexual violence. Almost 7 million people have been forced from their homes, often violently, making Colombia the country with the second largest number of internally displaced people, surpassed only by Syria.

In Colombia, people are not forced from their homes because of war, rather, war is waged for the very purpose of forcing them out. The central feature of

the conflict remains rampant inequality. Unsurprisingly, those who have benefitted most from war are the established elites, who have historically controlled access to land and its natural resources.

Over time, those who have been kicked off their land and stripped of the means to provide for themselves and their families, have been forced to relocate in the city, where they are marginalised and confront exploitation head-on.

Yet, since the start of the conflict in 1948 when Colombia's most charismatic leader, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated, people have fought back.

The fightback

Social movements at the forefront of the struggle are made up mostly of survivors of violence and human rights abuses, who know all too well the prospect of peace in Colombia does not rest solely on the negotiations between the rebel groups and the state. Many more people have a stake.

It's why indigenous and afro-descendant small-scale farmers; inter-city truck drivers and teachers; women led-organisations, students, their mothers, their sisters are coming together in protest. This is the spirit of the 'Minga'.

From Bogota and beyond, they will take to the streets to voice their anger at government policies that continue to concede large swathes of land to deeply destructive mining projects, and are leading to the privatisation of basic services, already denied to most Colombians.

Government initiatives like the recently announced ZIDRES law – the Zones of Interest for Economic and Social Development in Rural Area – will see land subjected to intense farming of single crops such as palm oil, grown for profit, whilst intensifying the deep divisions that led to the conflict in the first place.

For decades, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) signed between Colombia and the UK and other rich nations have allowed for the exploitation of labour and natural resources at the expense of ordinary Colombians. A 'post conflict' Colombia may well provide the 'risk free zones' and 'investor protections' craved by corporations, and from which British companies will benefit, but it will do little for the vast majority.

UK complicity

The UK is one of the top investors in Colombia; it is also complicit in the conflict. The operations of a number of UK-listed mining and energy companies such as BP, BHP Billiton and AngloAmerican, and their subsidiaries, have been accused of financing terror-generating paramilitary groups, central to the violence in Colombia. The presence of these companies is often associated with violent displacement and a chilling array of human rights abuses. Add to this the environmental impacts typical of oil and coal extraction, such as contamination of water sources and damage to bio-diversity, and the UK government is faced with an uncomfortable truth with regards to the future of UK business activity in such a 'post-conflict' era.

Colombia's grassroots social movements have been growing steadily since a succession of protests in 2013/14 demanded a more equal and just society. Back then, these calls were met with brutal violence and repression, leaving 164 people dead, thousands injured and even more criminalised on trumped up charges designed to discourage any challenge to the status-quo.

The threats of violence, repression and criminalisation will be more pressing this time. The stakes are higher. As the government reaches the final straight in the negotiations with the FARC, a surge of violence has been triggered by ultra-right wing paramilitaries who oppose the peace negotiations. It has resulted in the assassination of 134 activists in the last 18 months.

Still, the ordinary people of Colombia remain steadfast and courageous in the face of such intimidation. They want their seat at the table and to have a decisive say in a plan for a lasting and sustainable peace. Just as the power of the 'Minga' brings them together, their collective force will make sure President Santos listens.

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