**Armed Conflict and the Organizing Process
of Black Communities in the Colombian South Pacific**[1]

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On September 19th, 2001, in the afternoon, only a few meters away from the entrance of the church, a hit man shot Sister Yolanda Cerón eight times at point blank. The nun died at the local hospital only a few minutes later. Exactly a year before this, the paramilitary had arrived in Tumaco, a small city in the Colombian South Pacific (see map). This was not the first person they had killed in an effort to show their power, yet the murder of Sister Yolanda was a milestone in the collective imaginary of the people there and it marked a point of no return in the movement towards organization.

Up to just a little over ten years ago, scholars considered the Colombian Pacific Coast a paradigm of peace within a country that had been torn up by war and violence (Rosero 2002, Wouters 2001a, 2001b). In stark contrast with the rest of Colombia, the Pacific region had managed to stay out of the military race, the economy of terror and the violence as the main means for conflict resolution. It was not without reason that the Pacific was known as "peace haven" (Arocha 1993).

These conditions changed, however. Different armed actors that were involved in different forms of production and marketing of illegal drugs, one by one, began to fight over every river, beach, town and forest in the region through fire and bloodshed. All the way from the Atrato River in the very north, to Tumaco, which is close to the border with Ecuador, the Colombian Pacific Coast has become the heated site of war. Massacres happen often and the civilian population finds itself displaced in an effort to save their lives. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people from the Pacific Coast have left for the country's cities looking for refuge. Once there, they find themselves in a situation of sheer abandonment and desperation.

Just like in the rest of this country, the spread of armed confrontation, the rise of drug trafficking and the existence of state institutions that lack all legitimacy, people in the Pacific region have suffered the dismantling of their social networks and

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[1] This text was written as a paper for the Visiting Resource Professor del LLILAS, Universidad de Texas in Austin, Texas February-March 2010. It is based on research that was carried in partnership with the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History during 2004-2005. The results of the original research project have been supplemented and I have re-worked the interpretations included in this text in light of more recent developments.

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projects. The effects of the intensification of armed conflict have, however, been even more perverse in the Pacific Coast since they have been detrimental to a process of organized empowerment of Afro-Colombians claiming cultural and territorial rights for their ethnic group. This paradigmatic organizing process of black communities[3] in the Pacific Coast had managed to successfully negotiate with the government to create a legislative framework that not only set in motion the regulation of collective property to include great part of this region,[4] but it also began to give shape to certain forms of local government that made local organizations the most important parties in decisions involving their communities (Asher 2009, Escobar 2008).

The purpose of this text is to identify the implications of the emergence and spread of armed conflict in the ethnic-territorial organizing process of black communities in the Colombian South Pacific Coast.[5] Most of the studies on this region that have been carried out thus far have described and interpreted different aspects of the early organization; they have focused on those dynamics having to do with the ethnicization of black communities. No one has devoted enough attention to this last decade and to the effects of armed conflict in the transformation of these dynamics.[6] My working hypothesis is that the conditions of possibility upon which this process of ethnic-territorial organization of black communities was built have been radically transformed in the last few years. The rise and spread of armed conflict that came with the booming of drug trafficking in the area along with state intervention associated to Plan Colombia, have been major factors in this transformation.

Armed conflict breaks out

The arrival of paramilitaries has generally been associated to the military struggle over the region against FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional). Since the nineties, the occasional presence of the 29th Front of FARC and ELN's Comuneros del Sur in the towns that lie at the

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[3] By organization process of Black communities I am referring to the organizational dynamics related to the recognition of territorial, economic and cultural rights of Black communities as an ethnic group. See Escobar (2008) and Asher (2009).

[4] Last year, a document written by the Tumaco Diocese remarked that there are in the South Pacific Region "deeds to 36 collective territories belonging to Afro-Colombian communities, with a total of 1,023,370 hectares in which 15,713 families live" (2009: 45).

[5] By South Pacific Coast or Region I mean the territory encompassed in the lowlands and foothills of the Western branch of the Colombian Andes. This land is within the Colombian province of Nariño, which is why South Pacific, Southern Pacific Coast and Nariño's Coast are all synonymous.

[6] The work of Almario (2004) and Bravo (2003) are two prime examples.

foothills of the Western Mountain Range (Barbacoas and Magüi Payán),[7] has been a well-known fact. On their pair the appearance of paramilitary in Tumaco and nearby areas began in the second half of the year 2000 with the arrival of a group of about four-hundred men called Bloque Libertadores del Sur, under the command of Guillermo Pérez Alzate, a.k.a. 'Pablo Sevillano' (El País 05/13/2002, Semana 2003). In terms of a cartography of the war the paramilitary have greater control and presence over the coastal areas and population centers, whereas the guerrilla moves through the foothills and its adjacent areas (PCN 2001:6). The army and the police on their part, hold their seat in Tumaco and some other towns, out of which they launch their medium or large-scale operations. With the demobilization of Bloque Libertadores of paramilitary groups, on 25th of July of 2005, emerged a set of bands known as Los Rastrojos and Agilas Negras, which fight bloodily for the control over the drug bossiness in the region.

The sudden increase of coca plantations and of activities having to do with its production and marketing are the most significant factors that have contributed to the breaking out of conflict in the South Pacific Coast: "At the end of the nineties, the coca business, which had come from Putumayo, brought all kinds of people and armed groups [...]" (Diócesis de Tumaco 2009:23). These factors have, on their part, brought about other events such as the effects of the war on drugs that have been launched since the creation of Plan Colombia, especially in the neighboring province of Putumayo, and the regional repercussions of war dynamics between armed actors. As was emphatically put by a known magazine of national circulation: "After the beginning of Plan Colombia everything become worse. It, as a collateral damage, pushed on the coca crops toward the Pacific region. While Putumayo and Caqueta glyphosate were raining from the sky, Tumaco was filling with leaf pickers (*raspachines*) and laboratories. And, of course, of armies that guarded and killed by them" (Semana 2009).

The appearance of all armed actors in this region in a matter of a few years is no coincidence. The spread of coca crops is considered to be one of the most important factors to explain the sudden presence and unprecedented intensity of the confrontations to gain military control of the region. Even if there had been plantations in the areas near the Satinga and Saquianga rivers since the mid-eighties (Bravo 2003), it has only been in the second half of the nineties that the they have spread and become predominant in the region's economy.

There are two interrelated aspects that played a role in this spread of coca plantations. The first is the launching of Plan Colombia[8] which had the province of

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[7] For a timeline of the guerrilla's operatives in this region see Diocesis de Tumaco (2009).

[8] According to official information airplane crop spraying sponsored by Plan Colombia officially began in the province of Putumayo on December 22, 2000. By January 28, 2001, about 29,000 hectares had been sprayed: during 2001 94,000 hectares were sprayed. The Colombian drug enforcement police have confirmed that the spray of crops has increased by

Putumayo as its center of operations, causing the crops and infrastructures associated with them to move to other places including the Pacific Coast of the Nariño province: "Most of the coca crops of Putumayo have moved to Nariño (to the towns of Llorente, Barbacoas and rural Tumaco, mainly near the Chagüí River) [...]" (Codhes 2003: 4). The emphasis on coca crop spraying in Putumayo and the military interventions in the region (which are part of Plan Colombia's essentially repressive strategy to eradicate these crops and are intended to be a message of war against subversive groups), have been exerting pressure on everyone involved with the crops to move to other places where there are more favorable conditions. Some of these settlers and leaf pickers known as *raspachines*, had come to the Pacific Coast some time before following the patch of benefits of the coca bonanza in Putumayo. Most of the people that came to the Pacific Coast, however, were settlers that were fleeing political and economic violence. The case of the town of Llorente is quite telling in this respect:

> "Llorente went from having a population that was under 1,500 people two years ago, to becoming a massive settlement overrun by more than 20,000 displaced people coming from Putumayo and Caquetá, says the mayor of Tumaco Óscar Seidel Morales. He blames this phenomenon on the latest operations carried out by the Army related to the war on drugs and the spraying of crops in those places" (Jiménez 2001).

In this sense the spread of coca crops in the region brought swarms of people with it, many of whom came from far away places seeking to acquire new land: "Tumaco came to be in this situation as a reaction to Plan Colombia: the pressure that was put on Putumayo before is now felt in this port" (Castillo 2001). Yet another factor was added to this when there was a shift in farming technology in response to the repressive strategy of aerial crop spraying and the sporadic launches of military force in the area. A technology that involved a wider geographical spread of the crops and a smaller size of each plantation has been implemented in the Pacific Coast. This has made it so that there has been an "increase is the number of towns where there are crops even if the totality of the planted area is smaller" (Codhes 2003: 4).

The government poses a similar thesis concerning the relationship between the increase of illegal crops and the predominance of armed actors in Nariño:

> "The most important factor that explains the armed prominence gained by the actors of the conflict since the first half of the nineties, is the spread of illegal crops. Fronts 29 and 8 of FARC and Comuneros del Sur of ELN promoted the growth of poppies. They have pushed for peasants to farm these crops since the very beginning of the bonanza,

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42% in 2002, especially in Putumayo where there were more than 50,000 hectares of coca crops.

and kept big producers from coming into the area [...] At the same time, so called self-defense groups become rivals of the guerrillas when they launch their presence over the coca producing area in the southwestern part of the province, all the way from Tumaco to El Diviso in Ricaurte and from there to Barbacoas, in order to gain control over the Patía River into the Pacific Ocean going through the towns of Roberto Payán and Francisco Pizarro. The road to the ocean with its center in Llorente, which is within the Tumaco jurisdiction, is one of the main corridors of the regional coca economy in the Southwest. Under the watch of FARC, coca production and processing have increases as one goes towards the northwestern part of the province in El Charco and Santa Bárbara" (Vicepresidencia 2002: 13).

Another aspect claims that the spread of these crops must be taken as direct intervention of the guerrilla and the paramilitary, who promote, provide guarantees and struggle over these plantations. There are two senses in which this has taken place. One the one hand, they have stimulated (and at times exerted pressure on) the people that arrive and on local dwellers to farm this crop. This has been an indirect stimulus in the sense that it has allowed for third parties to distribute the seeds and other necessary resources to farm the crop (by resorting to debts) to then set taxes over harvests and regulate the prices. On the other hand, it has been a direct stimulus when it has caused local people to be displaced from their land because it is deemed to be suitable for the crop. These areas are then "re-populated" with new people that are ideologically aligned with their purposes (Codhes 2003: 4).

Another one of the factors explaining the presence of different armed actors and the rise of conflict has to do with the strategic position of this region when it comes to the marketing of drugs, whether they have been produced locally or come from other parts of the country. In fact "according to the DEA, 90% of drugs coming from Colombia do so by water. This is why whoever has control over the country's coasts has power, since all traffickers will be forced to deal with them" (Semana 2003). The geographic position of Nariño's coasts is one of the best for this type of commerce, not only because of the increased production of the drug within this province, but because it is right next to Putumayo and to Ecuador. The shape of the coast in the South Pacific, which is full of inlets and mangrove, and is crisscrossed by any number of rivers and tributaries that flow out of the depths of most dense jungle, makes it quite easy for speedboats to carry out cocaine going towards Central America and then North America.

The constant movement of boats carrying wood coming from the many sawmills that operate in the area, provides a fairly simple cover-up for drugs to come through to the port of Buenaventura. This flow of drugs also includes production materials and weapons, which can be easily brought from Ecuador through the filigree of inlets or overland, or from Buenaventura itself, in the boats I just described. The

Ecuadorian Pacific Coast has come to play a key role in the rearguard of some armed actors and in the logistics war and production of the narcotic.

For some members of the armed forces, these factors explain why conflict has appeared and intensified in the Pacific Coast of Nariño:

> "'The fact that the crops and production labs have been moved toward the jungles of the Pacific Coast, has turned this region into the main site of drug trafficking in the country' explained the Commander of the Navy, Admilral Mauricio Soto, to Semana, one of the most important news magazines in the country. The numbers speak for themselves. In 2002 the Military and the Police seized almost ninety tons of cocaine. The Navy alone seized 57.8 tons most of it coming from the coast of Nariño. 'When drug traffickers began to arrive, the guerrilla also showed up and then the paramilitary' claims a Nariño government official. First came ELN five or six years ago, but then FARC moved them out. When Front 29 seemed to be in control, the paramilitary showed up, and it is mostly they who have control of the business now' said this official" (Semana 2003).

In addition to all the factors that have already been described, some people belonging to grassroots organizations have also linked the presence of paramilitary groups to oil palm tree plantation owners. For example, what follows is an excerpt of what was said in a meeting organized by the communities of Chocó and of Mututá, in Antioquia, and by Human Rights Everywhere:

> "Community leaders in Tumaco and nearby towns, have expressed their concern […] [due to the fact that] 'since 2001 eleven paramilitary attacks against civilian population have taken place along the different riverbeds of this province. Many of the arguments of the perpetrators followed from the fact that that land had to be ready for palm tree farming. Between 1997 and 2004, 200 murders have been reported in the area, in addition to the innumerable disappearances and human rights violations.' The situation is quite worrisome, as armed men have snatched land from local small landowners by means of illegal settlement. These displaces people have then been forced into a type of 'slavery' in which they are must work and be paid in stamps" (Diario del Sur 02/12/2004).

Single-crop farming of palm trees in Tumaco has taken force and established itself in a manner that is unparalleled in other areas of the Pacific Coast.[9] The national

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[9] According to the Palm Tree Growers Association or Fedepalma, by 1999 there were around 20,966 hectares of palm trees in the Tumaco area. This accounts for 47.6% of the total surface that belongs to the town of Tumaco and for 13.3% of the total area that has been planted with palm trees in Colombia. Colombia is the number one producer of oil palm

government has its eyes set on palm farming and Tumaco has the advantage of also being a port out of which palm oil and it derivatives can be directly exported. This situation makes it so that the interests of business owners and the state become intermingled in the escalation of armed conflict in this area, not so much because of the relationship with paramilitary groups (which has be repeatedly reported by activists), but because Tumaco has become a strategic point in terms of economic development. It is important to point out that palm tree farming has been one of the flagship projects of Plan Colombia under the label of "alternative development". The fact that Tumaco, through Cordeagropaz, is one of the recipients of resources from this project, which amount to almost three million dollars, is quite telling (Plan Colombia 2004).

Even if palm plantations are beginning to be established in other parts of the Pacific Coast, this industry has already been fully developed in the southern part of the coast and it is the most important legal economic activity in the region. It follows form this, that the business interests that are at play in the southern Pacific are not a mere hypothesis (at times with fantasy) about a golden future, but are quite real and significant in national economic policy. Consequently, this is certainly a variable that must be taken into account when trying to look at the particulars of the rise of armed conflict in the present and in the years to come. This importance of the Pacific Coast in terms of economic policy has been further complemented by the crucial place that this region has acquired within President Uribe's "democratic security" policy and in the effort to eradicate illegal crops by means of a combination of spraying and military intervention (Gamboa 2005).

Leaders, organizations and project: Levels of the effects of conflict

For the purposes of explanation, one could point out three different levels in the organization processes of Black communities in order to grasp all the different implications that the armed conflict has had on such process: (1) the level of leaders, (2) the level of organizational structures and (3) the level of the political project.

Leaders

Let us begin by identifying the level of leaders in the ethnic-territorial organizations. Within the leaders, a difference can be noticed between 'historical leaders' and 'new leaders.' The first are all those that played a part in the enactment of Ley 70 (or Law 70, a law that granted certain collective rights for Black communities) which resulted in the creation of ethnic-territorial organizations and in the establishment

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trees in Latin America and number four in the world. 11% of domestic palm oil comes out of Tumaco, with an average of sixteen tons per hectare (Fedepalma 1999). This area must be even bigger nowadays as the last few years have witnessed an incredibly aggressive campaign funded by Plan Colombia, to expand palm tree plantations.

of a regional association known as Palenque Nariño. The 'new leaders' are those who have more recently become members of the community councils and the already existing ethnic-territorial organizations. I must point out that most of the older leaders left Tumaco for Bogotá between 2001 and 2002. Some of them were displaced and had to leave after their lives were threatened, while others left during the upheaval caused by the murder of Sister Yolanda Cerón, the threats of colleagues, and the collapse of the Palenque as a regional association, but for circumstances that were not so directly related to the rise of armed conflict. This flight was originally thought to be provisional though it later became permanent for some for to security reasons. Some leaders, however, did start to return to Tumaco after 2005. Most of the 'historical leaders' of the organizing process who came from rural areas, have chosen to become less visible in those areas where armed actors are present. Hernando Bravo, in his detailed ethnographic study of the Satinga and Sanquianga rivers, explains the following:

> "At this moment, the most important leaders of what was once known as the Palenque Regional de Nariño are all in Bogotá living as displaced people. They were forced to leave their homes by the amplification of the armed conflict and the presence of armed actors who want to control the business that has been spreading throughout the Pacific and that has caused traditional mining, farming and fishing productive systems to be transformed in several regions of the Pacific Coast of Nariño. And, even if the local leaders of the Association of Community Councils in the Northern and Central Areas of Nariño's Pacific Coast, among whom are the leaders of Satinga and Saquinaga, have not yet been expelled from their homes, they have had to make themselves strategically invisible, or, in other words, they now live in a situation 'forced emplacement' [...] and have no possibility of working in favor of processes of community organization or carrying political initiatives to strengthen organizing processes that seek to make the rights that Law 70 of 1993 recognizes in terms of collective territories, a reality" (2003:134).

This is how the rise of armed conflict has had a major influence on the leadership, more specifically on the 'historical leadership': it has forced them to leave the region or to become 'strategically invisible'.

This is not the case for the "new leaders", however. Even if some of them have been forced to leave or to work while being "strategically invisible", there are many "new leaders" for whom the rise of armed conflict has led to exactly the opposite: their own rise to leadership. Even though it is quite difficult to make generalizations, and it is even more so when it comes to thinking about the medium and long terms, the fact that many community council leaders, especially those tied to the newly formed RECONPAS (South Pacific Community Council Network), have managed to attain a position of leadership in the midst of armed conflict, cannot be denied. There are two factors that contribute to this apparent paradox. On the one hand, some of these

leaders have focused on developing production projects (especially oil and coconut palms) by means of organizations that have a strong influence among local businessmen such as Cordeagropaz and the well-known Coagropacífico. In this sense some alliances have been created which have marked a distance with the 'historical leaders' who were considered to be 'troublesome' and going against the interests of many businessmen. On the other hand, some other new leaders work by focusing on local issues within the spaces that have been opened by institutional means and do not raise questions about the armed actors and those that are related to them. The fact the older leaders have had to become "strategically invisible" has opened spaces for new leaders to rise.

And so, when we look at the level of leaders, we can see the combined effect that the flight and strategic invisibility of historical leaders and the rise of new leaders has meant to the succession of current visible leaders of the organizing processes of Black communities at the local and regional levels. This process of succession, as we shall see in what is to come, is not just process of replacement of some people by others. It entails a shift in the nature of the organizations and what is more, in the ethnic project that was originally conceived in the nineties. Also, this passing of the baton has not been without disagreements between the historical and the new leaders. These disagreements have come mostly in the shape of 'historical leaders' thinking that some of the 'new leaders' have been co-opted, are opportunistic and lack character. The new leaders, on their part, accuse the elders' of corruption and cronyism.[10]

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[10] Two issues here require further clarification in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. The first issue is that this distinction between 'historical leaders' and 'new leaders' is analytic. It is not my intention to suggest that all 'new leaders' have passively "lived with" armed actors or capitalistic projects. It is also not my intention to suggest that there is a necessary confrontation with the "historical leaders". My purpose is to explain the transformations and generational taking over within organizational dynamic (which have not simply disappeared) in a new context in which armed conflict and massive (legal and illegal) investment are present. These conditions were simply not present at the beginning of the 1990's when the project was started. Second, I would also like to be quite careful not to give the impression that I believe that there is one true project and corresponding interpretation of the struggle for rights that Black communities have carries out as an ethnic group. There have obviously always existed important differences not only within the different areas of the Pacific Coast of Nariño, but also at the different levels within the organized social movement (even within those organizations that openly identify themselves with the wider organization process). The way the project has been set into motion in Sating is not the same as the way it operated in Tumaco or Barbacoas. These differences include different forms of local or regional empowerment that get used in very contradictory ways depending of the different communities' and leaders' ideas of welfare.

The second level in which one can analyze the effects of armed conflict in the organizing processes of Black communities in this area, includes community councils and organizations, and their actions. Even though one can identify some of the community councils and organizations that have actually gained strength within the context of armed conflict (but not necessarily because of it), in general terms the effect of armed conflict on the region has been to debilitate most organizations –a kind of *organizational weakening*.[11] The enormous process of empowerment by leaders and organizations for many years brought about changes in many aspects of the politics and land ownership of the region. By the end of the nineties, however, internal tensions of the organizations with regards to the representation and reach of their political project were perfectly evident. The rise of armed conflict and all the other factors related to it, made it so that something that appeared as just one line within the process became prevalent.

The organizational weakening took place when the leaders disappeared (either when they were killed or making them leave the region through threats) and when they were forbidden to carry out any kind of activity coming from the community councils and organizations. Activists belonging to the Process of Black Communities explicitly mention these sorts of effects on organizational dynamics when from direct action by armed actors:

> "Starting in 1998 until today, black communities have gone through exceptionally tough times which have forced them to decrease their social work, due to threats, acts of violence and murders. The case of the person who was legally in charge of the Community Council of Alto Mira and Fronter, Mr. Francsico Hurtado Cabezas, is just one example of this. These circumstances lead to us leave the places where we lived, struggled and worked, to come to the urban parts of nearby towns and the most marginal areas of big cities in hoards […] It is for these reasons that we need the non-governmental organizations that have always helped the Process of Black Communities, to stand by us more than ever and to do what they can so that our struggle is not debilitated any further. We need them to guarantee the most basic conditions for those of us that have been displaced, so that we can continue to work on organizing the different communities that are still holding a front of resistance in their regions" (PCN 2001: 3).

In Bocas de Satinga, which is a smaller village within the territory of the town of Olaya Herrera, we find the following when it comes to explicit bans:

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[11] This idea of organizational demise has been fully developed in Anthropologist Hernando Bravo's (2003) Master's thesis, which he developed in the Satianga and Saquianga rivers. I have borrowed the concept, as I believe it is applicable to the context of the South Pacific.

"[...] When it comes to Process of Black Communities, we completely stopped hearing about their leaders and representatives. When the paramilitary came in, they announced that any type of gathering that was not authorized by them was completely forbidden. They also broke into the headquarters of the peasant community organizations and of the process, burnt their files and set a ban on any kind of work similar to what these groups had carried out [...] Most of them have had to distance themselves from any kind of political activism and work in other jobs [...]" (Bravo 2003: 142-143, 144).

Besides these most explicit forms of prohibition, the organizational weakening became indirectly full fledged because of the rise of armed conflict when the institutional framework that had allowed for the empowering of organizations, stopped working or was transformed in order to focus on the military and repressive confrontation of armed actors and organized crime related to drug trafficking. In other words, with the rise of armed conflict, the institutional framework (which included government and non-government programs and offices) that had become sensitive ethnic claims and that had funded specific activities and organizational dynamics either disappeared or had to shift its attention toward actions to alleviate repression or provide humanitarian aid.

Little by little all projects geared towards the conservation of biodiversity or the sustainable use of natural resources have disappeared. During the 1990's these projects had been crucial to the flow of economic resources and to the development of programs and policies that favored the organizing movement (Proyecto Biopacifico, Proyecto Guandal, Proyecto Maidi and Proyecto Manglares are some examples). Instances of this such the Regional Committees in which several state institutions came together with representative from the ethnic-territorial organizations, have also disappeared. Even if the rise of armed conflict is not the only cause for the demise of these projects and instances, one cannot claim that it did not play a role. If there is only one thing that is clear, is has to be that the demise of ethnic-territorial organization processes has been made much worse by the absolute lack of appropriate institutional conditions based out on which the process was born and developed in the 1990's.

This organizational weakness and vulnerability in this region of the Pacific, has a lot to do with the difficulty of bringing efforts of civilian resistance like the ones that have taken place in Chocó and Valle del Cauca, to reality. This organizational weakness, nevertheless, should not be seen only as something negative, that is, as failure and paralysis. It has in fact pushed for organizational strategies and impulses to be thought of in new ways, which include priorities such as the protection of Human Rights, and more specifically the demand that armed actors respect their right to live in their territories with self-determination.

Many of the leaders that were forced to leave have thus continued their organizing efforts from new places and in new instances of the project. One important example

of this was the creation of a PCN office in Bogotá in which many of the historical leaders of the Palenque de Nariño have participated. This has implied that, among other things, there is a now a way to shore up certain organizational dynamics in the Pacific Coast of Nariño. Outside support to those affected by armed conflict in the region can also be provided through the help of different non-government organizations that are sympathetic to the situation and by appealing to state institutions that operate out of Bogotá.[12] And that is not all- It has also made the entire organizational process more aware of how to politically include the different urban dynamics and experiences that Black people in Colombia go through. In this sense, the organizational demise is also giving signs of having pushed the leaders to rethink and shift their process. This was done by reassessing Black people's rights as an ethnic group and making them go beyond the prevalent presuppositions that were embodied in Law 70 of 1993.[13]

Political Project

The project itself constitutes the third level in which the effects of the rise of armed conflict ought to be examined.[14] The "project" refers to the political horizon that determines the specificity of the organizing process of Black communities in the Southern Pacific Coast. All the premises and proposals that are articulated in the organizing practices and discourses of Black communities as an ethnic group, define this horizon. In other words, this refers to the scaffolding of their cultural politics. The way in which the project was created in the 1990's, concretely expressed a demand that was threefold in terms of the necessary relationship between territory, identity and culture. By territory they did not simply mean property and rights over land, but a wider exercise of collective autonomous territoriality that supports the reproduction of both nature and community. By identity they meant the possibility of being a Black community, of equality in difference, of the enunciation of an alternative future through dignifying the shared past and present. By culture they

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[12] For an example see the proposal that the PCN developed to confront the rise of armed conflict and Human Rights violations in Nariño (PCN 2001b).

[13] These presuppositions, as several scholars have noted (Agudelo 2004, Wade 1996) had operated from an indianized, communalized, ruralized and Pacific-centered notion of lateritic that was set before the armed conflict.

[14] There are different factions within the Black social movement in Colombia. The ethnic-territorial organizations of the Pacific, are the paradigm of the project I am specifically referring to (Escobar 2008). Even if there has been some influence from other Black factions and projects, since the 1990's the project demanding territory, identity and culture of Black communities that identify themselves as an ethnic group (what I have elsewhere referred to as the ethinicization of blackness, Restrepo 2004a), has been absolutely prevalent in Nariño. This is why I focus on this project and not on other expressions of the Black social movement to talk about its impact.

meant a way "tying down" both territory and identity; what a Black community actually does and imagines.

It must be noted that the conditions under which the project was originally conceived have been radically changed by the rise of armed conflict. First, the project actually relies on an institutional structure that is guaranteed by the Rule of Law. It was only on the basis of recognition of certain constitutional principles and legislative actions that the organizations the represented the local population could actually set particular actions in motion in the face of other actors and interests, in order to make their threefold demand of territory, identity and culture a reality. In other words, the organizational dynamics rely on a minimal standard of democracy and respect for the Rule of Law if they seek to wield the ethnic and cultural rights that were recognized by the law (Agudelo 2002, Almario 2004). With the rise of confrontation, armed actors who dispute the legitimacy of the rule of law by illegal means and in the context of a criminalized economy, appeal to institutional mechanisms and juridical mechanisms that are no loner a viable option in terms of providing guarantees for the project. The language of war and 'illegality' in which many actors in the region speak, undermines all the conditions of possibility of a project that seeks to transform the power relations by means of social mobilization in hopes of redefining the institutional framework itself (Oslender 2004: 38).

Second, the project is based upon a group of practices and expectations of the local population that have actually been rapidly changing in the last few years. These practices make reference to particular types of technology, relationships and economic rationalities that had been considered traditional for these people. These 'traditional production practices' are assumed to reproduce not just a harmonious relationship with the environment but to also guarantee the preservation of the "cultural values of the community" which are vital to the way in which they manage their land. The expectations refer to the concrete content of notions of individual and collective welfare in the short, medium and long terms. In other words, these expectations make up the concrete contents of the future collective will. The double articulation of these practices and expectations is what makes up the socioeconomic base upon which the project has been conceived.

The rise of armed conflict and most of all, the recent predominance of an economy that is linked to drug trafficking have eroded this base. On the one hand these so-called "traditional practices of production" have been hit with more or less intensity depending on the extent to which coca crops and activities related to the production of cocaine have taken hold of a particular area. As a document published by the diocese of Tumaco reports: "[...] the traditional economy in all the different towns of Nariño's Pacific Coast has been invaded and partially replaced by coca farming and its related economy" (2009: 18). On the other hand, traditional economic activities and the relationships that these were based on have been hard-hit by the war for reasons ranging from forced emplacement, to the disappearance of a demand for local products or the avalanche of products that come with the coca bonanza. In addition to all of this is the fact that palm tree farming by local people has been

heavily promoted with funds from Plan Colombia through an effort by Cordeagropaz.[15] When it comes to the expectations, the situation also does not look good. The consumption patterns and the mechanisms of prestige are more and more, especially in the new generations, getting tied to notions of individual welfare that are incompatible, and even antagonistic, to those that were defined by the original Black community project.

The analytical framework that Oscar Alamario (2004) brings to the table gains particular relevance given the situation. Almario invites us to think about the qualitative contradiction between the emerging socio-economic model (which is referred to as the model for a new economy) and the other two that are present in the regions (the classic extractive model and the alternative model which is at the base of the project). When talking about the conflict, Almario considers that

> "[its] economic dimension has [...] to do with the overlap and competition of contrasting models and their corresponding agents: the classic extractive model of external agents (both national and foreign), which has always been levered on a ethnocentric paradigm; Black people's alternative model which has had a very low profile in the past but has recently entered a period of transition in hopes of gaining territorial control and autonomous development; and the new economy model which, though existing before the current war, has been accelerated by it, and within which the elements of the wildest version of the extractive model and illegal, criminal and paramilitary elements get mixed up with the expectations of trans-national capital and the global context. Out of these three models, the new economy model represents a qualitative change in the economic and social conditions of the region, as far as it seeks to make transformations which would dramatically alter all power relations in general and ethnic and cultural relations in particular" (2004: 96-97).

The transformations that have taken place at the socioeconomic base of the project that had been defined by the Black communities' process have been so powerful –as Carlos Efrén Agudelo (2002) had first suggested which was then seconded by others (Escobar 2004, Villa 2003)- that the we have actually seen an integration of this to a nation-building project. This is something that had not been possible since independence and with relation to which many development projects in the last

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[15] The official numbers say that "By the year 1999, 20,000 hectares has been planted out of which 126 plots covering a total area of 2783 hectares were owned be small farmed and 10 plots covering a total area o 14,096 hectares were owned by huge palm industries like Astorca and Palmas de Tumaco. The government entity that promotes industrial agricultural development, Cordeagropaz is currently carrying out a project in which 4,000 hectares will be planted by small farmers" (Corponariño 2001: 77-78). However, this tendency has become even more pronounced in the last few years with the resources provided by Plan Colombia. For an ethnographic analysis of the transformations in practices and social relations of the local population de to palm farming, see Restrepo (2004b).

three decades had failed. The consolidation has taken place in the last place through the unfortunate combination of "bullets, coca and cash".

Nevertheless, there are two aspects that must be taken into account with respect to the erosion of the socioeconomic base of the project. First, one must consider the fact that this is by no means a homogenous process as its impact in the region has been uneven. This means that the effects of the 'new economic model' on the socioeconomic base of the project have not had the same strength within Tumaco or in the town of Llorente, as they have had in Saquianga Natural Park. Second, this progress of the 'new economic model' and the subsequent erosion of the socioeconomic base have not by any means erased with one stroke the relationships and rationalities that have been present in these people for generations. Though it has absorbed and reorganized them in an assemblage in which the new model seems to dominate, we cannot think of this as a empty slate phenomenon.

Finally, one can identify some substantial demographic transformations in some areas of Nariño's Pacific Coast, which change the conditions of possibility out of which the project had been articulated thus far. The organizing process was being carried out under the premise that most (between 90 and 95%) local Black people had settled in this area a few generations ago, and that they had in fact established property over this land. This demographic base has been impacted in two different ways. On the one hand we have processes of de-territorialization and displacement. It is important to understand that these processes of de-territorialization are not restricted to people being forced from their land and homes, but are understood more widely to translate into the impossibility of living and inhabiting a particular territory due to the temporary or permanent flight of its inhabitants or to restrictions on the movement of people and things.[16] This also includes the impairment of the practices of local dwellers and of their organizational means to define the autonomy, property and control of their territory (Oslender 2004: 43). In the end, these processes of de-territorialization lead not only to de-territorialized peoples, but to territories without people (Almario 2004: 91). De-territorialization is one of the starkest effects of the rise of armed conflict in Nariño's Pacific Coast.[17]

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[16] The restrictions on the movement of people and things that some activists have come to call forced emplacement (Rosero 2004), are very explicit when they are associated with bans that have been set by armed actors as a part of their struggle to control the territory.

[17] Anthropologist Stella Rodriguez refers to the need to record the minutia of movement of people and groups as the armed conflict has gotten worse: "There are not very many massive displacements of groups of people in Nariño's Coast. Most of the displacements are of individuals and families. On the other hand, forced displacements are carried out in rural areas and not near populated centers, which makes it very difficult to detect and resolve. This is made worse by the fact that many displacements are not final, but transitory depending on where the armed actors happen to be at a given time. The towns of El Charco and La Tola were practically emptied out [...] but later on the people came back from other towns and from cities like Cali, Buenaventura an Guapi" (2003: 1).

On the other hand, there is a growing presence of people coming from different parts of the country, but especially from Putumayo, Antioquia and Valle del Cauca. These transformations are more noticeable within the more densely populated areas of towns. In towns like Tumaco, Llorente, El Charco or Bocas de Satinga, outsiders, mainly people coming from Antioquia known as *paisas*[18] have taken control of commerce. In Tumaco, to give an example, "[...] big stores have been opened which have displaced local business, big home appliance, clothing and shoes franchise stores have been created as well supermarkets, which have been set up in a network or in commerce associations."[19]

Though there are some people from the South Pacific that had migrated to Putumayo, had participated in the advent of coca to have their share in the quick economic benefits, most of the people that have taken part in this most recent wave come from other parts of the country. These people include the poorest peasants who had already been expelled from their land by political and economic violence and small and medium sized business owners who are looking for some quick money.

Conclusions

The organizing process of Black communities from the South Pacific, in less than a decade, had managed to have their collective property rights recognized over land that was up to that point considered public by the state. They had done this by setting their cultural identity and their ethnic and cultural organizations as referents according to which the region was conceived and the subjectivities of many people were constituted. Everything seemed to indicate that the empowerment that ethnic organizations enabled, would lead to the creation of a new form of territorial planning and of interaction between the local and regional spheres.

However, the escalation of armed conflict among the different actors which was intimately related to the production and marketing of narcotics, has happened with unprecedented speed. In just a few years the Pacific region and the lives of many of its inhabitants and their organizational dynamics have been radically transformed. The effects of the rise of armed conflict and the drug trafficking boom as well as the government's strategies to counteract them, have significantly changed the demographic, socioeconomic, institutional and political bases upon which the organizing process had been built up in the 1990's. There is no doubt that Plan

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[18] Though in most of Colombia the term *paisa* refers to people from Antioquia, in the South Pacific the word refers to anyone who comes from the interior of the country but is not someone who lives in the mountainous area of Nariño. So people from el Vale, Antioquia, and Bogotá are all *paisas.*

[19] Interview with a leader from Tumaco, 12/03/2004.

Colombia has been an important catalyst for conflict in the Southern Pacific as it has caused actors and crops to move from Putumayo to Nariño.

The implications of the fact that all parts in conflict including the guerrilla, the paramilitary and the military are fighting over control of the area, must be looked at from different levels. While some of these implications have been immediately obvious and can be directly attributed to their presence and struggle, there are others that need to be examined in the medium-long term as they will only appear as indirect or collateral damage. In that same way, while some involve certain aspects of the organizational process, they may have no impact on other areas. Though in general they point towards demise and loss, they must not only be analyzed in terms of their negative effects as they have in fact articulated answers and strategies that must also be taken into account. Just as it would be an analytical and political mistake to blame all the difficulties of the organizing process of Black communities in the region on the rise of armed conflict, it would not be accurate to underestimate their effects.

Another key aspect of the analysis is that one cannot sever the links between armed conflict and the factors that are associated to it, but those factors in themselves cannot be reduced to the conflict itself. In this sense it is absolutely crucial to include the effects of the region's economic and demographic transformations that are tied to drug trafficking, as well as those that belong to the more general strategies of war that are used by all actors of armed conflict in Colombia, including the State.

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