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Analysis on Land Restitution Processes in Colombia

MASKED MEN INTIMIDATE THE HUMANITARIAN ZONE OF CARACOLÍ

Two men wearing ski masks and dressed in all black were spotted late on the afternoon of Sunday, October 22, by a woman collecting firewood outside of the Humanitarian Zone of Caracolí. She immediately ran back to the Humanitarian Zone and informed Justicia y Paz of the situation. Meanwhile, several members from the community who were shopping at a nearby town waited until it was safe to return.

In potentially dangerous situations such as this, Justicia y Paz notifies the appropriate governmental authorities and verifies the details of what transpired. Given the context in Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó, Justicia y Paz is obligated to start at the top and get in touch with the Office of the Vice Presidency. Only pressure from the highest echelons of the Colombian government sometimes translates into action

on the ground by local police and military units. However, the authorities in Bogota often take the military at their word, which often does not reflect the truth. Justicia y Paz has denounced this lack of verification during meetings with the government on protective measures.

The Humanitarian Zone of Caracolí was founded in 2006 and is currently home to 13 families. They face daily struggles against cattle ranchers who want to kick them off of their territory. However, the Humanitarian Zone of Caracolí has solicited collective protective measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Despite international visibility, members of the Humanitarian Zone receive death threats, and the community as a whole is bullied and intimidated in a variety of ways. As a result of the communities' demands for justice, Colombia's own Constitutional Court ordered the removal of outsiders from the community in Order 202 of 2009.



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By the time we left the Humanitarian Zone of Camelias to verify what happened in Caracolí it was already dusk. We arrived in Brisas at around 7:30 p.m. and met with the members of the community who were waiting to return home. Brisas is a town on the Curvaradó River and has a permanent presence of the 17th Brigade of the Colombian Army. It is also a paramilitary checkpoint in the region. We quickly got onto moto-taxis and left for Caracolí.

You have to hike two kilometers from the nearby road in order to enter the Humanitarian Zone of Caracolí. After we paid the moto-taxis and started our walk into the community, a motorcycle slowly approached the trailhead. The man on the motorcycle checked us out and stopped at a tree about forty meters away from the trail. We continued to walk toward the community while the man spoke on his cell phone. We finally reached the Humanitarian Zone after about thirty minutes of walking through the same banana groves where the intruders were last seen. Many were frightened by what happened earlier.

The following morning, the military arrived outside of the Humanitarian Zone of Caracolí. The military is supposed to maintain a security perimeter around the Humanitarian Zone—they had not done so in three months. We returned to Camelias after breakfast at around 9:30 a.m.

On October 23, two unknown men dressed as civilians with GPS equipment arrived in Caracolí no more than four hours after we left. Members of the community asked the two men what they were doing in the in the community. The two men provided several alibis when asked who they were by community

members: they said that they were visiting family and laughed; they said that the leader of the community was waiting for them; and finally they said that they were part of the military. The head of the military perimeter confirmed that they were part of the military. The two men supposedly wanted to discuss the security situation in the region. When one of the community leaders said that this would be discussed at meetings on the protective measures in Bogota, one of the two men said he was “rude” and refused to speak with the leader. The two men insisted on meeting with other members of the community, but the community supported the leader’s decision and left the area. The two men took photos, registered their location with the GPS, and left.

We returned to Caracolí with international observers within one hour of the two men’s arrival. They were already gone. Within one hour, the military perimeter also left the community.

On October 24 and 25, intruders entered the community of Caracolí at night. According to information from people living in the region, the intruders are part of the Águilas Negras (Black Eagles), a paramilitary group operating in the area.

The people of the Humanitarian Zone of Caracolí live in a climate of fear. The majority of the community members were forcibly displaced several times in 1997. The events of last week did not surprise anyone, but it certainly scared them. This form of constant pressure attempts to accomplish the same goal of the brazen violence of the last fifteen years—force the people off of the land and facilitate the implementation of large-scale development projects.