

## Human Rights

# PEOPLE DEMANDING ITS RIGHT TO EXIST

*The establishment of the AUC in the Sierra has had heartbreaking consequences. Threats, selective deaths and massacres, massive displacements, abuses of all kinds towards the population, food and medical restrictions, and land appropriation – fear and terror have seized the zone*

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**T**he Kankuamo people is located in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta in the north of Colombia and neighbors three other indigenous towns in this beautiful territory: Ika (or Arhuaco), Kogi and Wiwa. These four peoples have inhabited the Sierra since time immemorial. Their home and role in this world contributes to the balance of the universe. Their objective is not to accumulate goods, nor to dominate other towns. Their reason for existence is that of care.

Nevertheless, Kankuamo and its culture have been attacked in brutal form throughout the history of colonization, whereby balance does not reign, where little by little care no longer reigns and, through the imposition of religion, so-called civilization disappears their language, their dress, their beliefs, their customs. A profound confusion between the truth of indigenous knowing and the mirage of white appearance took force greatly within. Multiple events and actors brought about this situation at different moments.

We have already named the Catholic Church as having implanted their mission of converting all to a Christian God. Soon after, commercialization and economic impacts of development models began imposing coffee and other products on their culture, the colonization product of violence in the Fifties, the exercise of traditional politicians and their networks, and their diverse projects of armed warfare and their strategic vision of the Sierra. A dynamic game of ignorance, imposition and disrespect gave rise to dizzying acculturation that dissolved discussions and internal tensions in Kankuamo and its neighboring towns.

From this process a current of recovering its identity arose to the center of this town, rejoining with its sleepy but not disappeared indigenous self. Thus they turned again to their brothers and neighbors to reclaim their customs, to fortify again the fourth leg of the 'bank' keeping the universe balanced. The Kankuamo women and men have committed themselves to this. The smaller town halls were constituted, named the Governing Town Hall. This was so named with a particular charismatic and committed man in mind; a man with an indigenous heart: Jaime Aryan. Little by little this need for recovery extended, its encounter with the traditional self becoming more and more deep. The 'payment as ritual' grounded in these principles returned to influence many Kankuamos, and the fight for the recognition of territory began. For years and years the process of legalization continued. The Colombian government delayed its approval until international pressure forced the approval in 2003. Nevertheless, this process of identity recovery was not received everywhere with 'good eyes'.

During this process a new actor appeared on the scene. The self-defense forces (AUC) in Cesar, with their multiple expressions, blocks and commanders, declared war on the inhabitants of the Sierra Nevada, publicly expressing that this place was an indigenous nest for guerrilla bandits, a place of refuge for kidnappers, therefore making the towns their accomplice. AUC completely dominated the lower region of the Sierra. Nowadays nothing moves in the Valley of Upar that AUC does not know about, nor controls, nor handles, right in front of the silent, local, trading, political authorities, and the military forces. Some of their commanders belong to the prestigious families of the region, as was the case with Jorge 40, and as was expressed in the magazine *Semana* (Week) and in other mass media.

The entrance and establishment of the self-defense forces in different encampments has had heartbreaking consequences in the region. Threats, selective deaths and massacres, massive displacements, abuses of all kinds towards the population, food and medical restrictions, and land appropriation – fear and terror have seized the zone.

All the towns of the Sierra, and especially Kankuamo, have been of high priority for AUC. A new era of threat and of terror began. Since 1986, approximately 221 natives of this town have been assassinated. Most recently, Freddy Aryan, the person in charge of human rights in Kankuamo and brother of the Cabildo Gobernador, was murdered during negotiations between the government and AUC.

Clearly, this case has many contradictions and aberrations.

Let us try then to hypothesize about the AUC interests in this region. The Sierra, by its geographic location, is an 'escarped' zone, perfect for the strategic development of armed conflict. Its access to the sea, from the region of Urabá to Guajira, for import and export of arms and illicit drug trafficking, makes it a strategic region.

The economic conversion of the lower region of the Valley, within the neoliberal scheme, is urgent. Hydric control is vital, since the Sierra is the hydrographic center that feeds all the surrounding valleys which previously produced an abundance of rice, sorghum and cotton. Today, these crops are in trouble. Additionally, the dominion of the indigenous towns is unfeasible for these economic projects. Their sense of preservation and resistance are not conducive to a competitive market. Especially since these towns have demanded their right to autonomy and free development. We say that the aberrations and contradictions are seen clearly because the constitution of this country, the acceptance of international treaties, the permanent humanitarian missions carried out, are apparently not insufficient for respecting the legitimacy and right of a town to demand for itself the right TO BE. That is to say, this shows clearly how impossible it is for a town to be a political subject, making things happen. The armed actors and the traditional politicians of the region believe they are the only political subjects and there is no power left for anyone else.

Nowadays Kankuamo continues its project of resistance and recovery. It is the obligation of everyone that we create the right to freedom, autonomy, and diversity, endorsing these processes that are born of feeling and a town's recognition of its own identity. The Colombian people must learn from these experiences. Colombia is fractured and lacks cultural identity. The people must demand the government assume responsibility for guaranteeing the existence of these towns, expose the murders of the Kankuamo people, and punish the perpetrators. Otherwise the state reveals its incapacity to deal with, or its tolerance of, these acts.