

TRIBUNA

Buenaventura, victims of development

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The land has experienced war first-hand, as well as the consequences of drug trafficking. Today, it is neo-paramilitary violence that continues to terrorize this Colombian Pacific city. Many of its Afro-descendant communities associate this violence with the presence of the large mega-port projects the region needs to expand and one of the companies involved has its headquarters in Catalonia.

As a result of its strategic location on the shores of the Pacific only 115 kilometres from Cali, Buenaventura has become a key point in Colombia's economic development which policymakers rush to consolidate as one of the biggest ports in Latin America. In accordance with the Free Trade Agreements already signed which establish the Pacific Alliance, the country has long been making every possible effort to put the trade connection between the Colombian interior and major ports in Asia and the United States on the map. It is said that currently, around 60% of all goods entering and leaving Colombia do so through Buenaventura.

Buenaventura exists as a port, but not as a city. This is evidenced by the deplorable living conditions of its inhabitants, which are in stark contrast with the many mega-projects currently being developed in the city and all of which are connected with the port's expansion. And while the Buenaventurian port expands to improve the country's competitiveness, life in the city itself is mired in shocking poverty where inhabitants are forced to live with alarming levels of violence. The city's inhabitants have never been a priority here. In addition, unlike other ports in the world, Buenaventura port activity has no ties to the local economy. The goods arrive in Buenaventura to be exported or imported merely cross the city. The unemployment rate is around 40%.

“ As the port is expanded, life in the city itself is mired in shocking poverty and residents are forced to live with alarming levels of violence ”

People have been condemning the social situation in Buenaventura, raising awareness and sounding alarm bells for some time now, but, far from improving, the city's plight continues to worsen day by day. There has been no investment in education or health, the public hospital was even closed down and 80% of its residents live in poverty.

The violence

In addition to the situation of poverty, the region and the city have been engulfed in an ongoing war for the past 15 years. Drug trafficking and armed conflict first gained a foothold with the arrival of the FARC and later on came the paramilitary groups, which subsequently re-formed into criminal gangs, such as *Los Urabeños* and *La Empresa*. The armed conflict has left more than 2,000 dead in the city over the past five years, not to mention the thousands of displaced, fleeing the violence, and the hundreds of disappeared.

Although there has been a slight decrease in violence, the so called neo-paramilitary groups continue to impose their authority in many districts by establishing tight social controls, collecting taxes and through extortion. Until very recently, the pinnacle of their violent strategy were the so-called *casas de pique*, houses scattered throughout the city where their victims were taken to be dismembered.

But the war was not the only source of violence. Many wonder about the reasons behind the level of violence and whether there might be a connection with the expansion of the city's port. Senator Alexander López, a member of the progressive Polo Democrático party, is convinced there is. “They are creating an environment of terror so that the locals are forced to abandon the area. Of the 340,000 people living in the city, more than 140,000 have been displaced in the last twenty years. The majority of these lived in neighbourhoods in the low tide districts, where the port infrastructure is being built”,

he says. Many of the city's social organizations are also convinced that the violence responds to powerful business interests and that the paramilitaries only do the dirty work.

A sea of mega-projects

The Sociedad Portuaria de Buenaventura, successor to the privatized Ports de Colombia, still controls 70 percent of the goods that pass through the city. However, in recent years, the world's major port operators have started arriving in Buenaventura. One of these is the Spanish company, Terminal de Contenedor de Buenaventura (TCBUEN), a subsidiary of the Grup Marítim Terminal de Contenedors de Barcelona (Grup TCB), whose headquarters are in the Catalan capital.

Why is a Catalan company doing business in the midst of so much cruelty? This was the question that sparked the Catalan Table for Peace and Human Rights in Colombia to prepare a report¹ on this company's dealings in the Colombian city. The report calls into question the company's performance and considers that its investment in Buenaventura has developed within the context of serious human rights violations. The report found that TCBUEN activities have made life unbearable for residents in the Inmaculada and Santa Fe neighbourhoods, which are adjacent to the project. The Table recalls, moreover, that the company failed to engage in any kind of prior consultation process with the communities.

“ Many critics argue that building a port for inflammable materials in the middle of a city is a nothing short of outrageous ”

Local community leader Rocio del Pilar Segura, a resident of the Inmaculada neighbourhood, lives just twenty meters from TCBUEN, separated by a wall. According to Segura, the noise generated from loading and unloading goods makes sleeping impossible and is unbearable. Segura also says that the vibrations from this work are causing cracks to appear in homes, and the company has failed to make good on its

promise to provide employment for people in the community. The affected residents also complain about the loss of local recreational spaces and the danger to residents from the road which carries hundreds of trucks entering and leaving the port each day. Furthermore, there is widespread condemnation of the adverse impact on the mangrove ecosystem and traditional fishing activities.

Last April, the case study was presented to the Catalan Parliament in an effort to reopen the debate on the need to exert control mechanisms on transnational companies that operate abroad and to set up an Observatory to oversee their activities. The company was invited to the session to present their side of the story, but refused the invitation to appear. However, they did agree to meet with the Catalan delegation during its visit to the headquarters of TCBUEN in Buenaventura last April. The Valencian Manager, Miguel Ruiz, denied all the accusations, reiterated that the company was not compelled to engage in any consultation and rejected the claim that the company's establishment in the area generated massive displacement. "Our operations only affected 33 families, which were relocated, and an area of 142 hectares of mangrove, which we repopulated elsewhere. Upcoming plans for expansion will have no impact on the neighbourhoods. We pay 23,000,000 pesos annually to the government in taxes and we cannot be held accountable if this money is not reinvested in the city," he said.

“ “They are creating an environment of terror so that the locals are forced to abandon the area” ”

Several months ago, TCB sold its majority share in the Danish group Maersk APM Terminals and is currently pending the outcome of the scandal for an alleged case of bribery in which the company was implicated in Guatemala sparking Interpol to issue a warrant for the location and arrest of company president, Ángel Pérez Maura.

The man responsible for TCBUEN's arrival in Buenaventura is controversial local businessman, Oscar Isaza. Isaza, who wields huge influence in the city, is currently masterminding an ambitious new port complex that would occupy 150 hectares of

Buenaventura's bay area. The project, known as Puerto Solo, is set to build terminals for different energy uses, from where it will be possible to transport oil, propane or butane, as well as other raw materials. With all this in mind, there is a growing number of critics who argue that building a port for inflammable materials in the middle of a city is a nothing short of outrageous.

Another recent arrival in Buenaventura is Philippine multi-millionaire Enrique Rickie, one of the world's wealthiest port tycoons who is set to put the Aguadulce terminal into operation. This new port will occupy around 225 hectares and will affect the area known locally as Bajo Calima. There are also other projects, involving port activities, which are already having, or are set to have a significant impact on the area, such as the open coal storage docks as well as the planned construction of another port in the outer bay.

“ Any plan must take into account the Afro-Columbian population, their culture and singularities ”

“Somos Pacífico”

In the midst of this complex context of violence and economic interests lives the mostly Afro-Columbian population. Despite everything, these black Pacific communities strive to continue to build their own lifestyles and conserve their identity. For them, this region is of immense importance which they see as being under threat from this development model which they claim, violates their constitutionally recognized ancestral rights.

Indeed, the development plan for Buenaventura, known as the Master Plan, was drawn up by Spanish consultants Esteyco and includes proposals regarding major guidelines the city should follow for the upcoming 40 years. The Barcelona brand is very present in the document that was drafted by a team of planners and technicians with close ties to the Catalan Socialist mayor of Barcelona, Jordi Hereu and former urban Planning councillor Manuel García Bragado, among others. Implementing the Master Plan,

currently on standby, would involve a radical transformation of Buenaventura. One of the planning proposals endorsed by consultants Esteyco involves the construction of a tourist dam and hotel complex. The project would affect about 3,400 families who would be forced to leave their stilt house homes currently located in the low tidal area neighbourhoods.

As Enrique Simonja from Justice and Peace pointed out, any plan must take into account the Afro-Columbian population. African communities cannot be considered a hindrance to development; their culture and individuality must be recognised because without their culture, a people become worthless.

1. Communities under siege. The impacts of a Catalan company, TCB Group, in Buenaventura, Colombia. Report by Tomàs Gisbert, Maria Jesús Pinto and Xavier Sulé (in Spanish).

Photography : Xavier Sulé

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