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MONTES DE MARÍA: WHO INHERITED THE AUC'S BLOODSTAINED WEALTH?

Montes de María: ¿Quién heredó la riqueza manchada de sangre de las AUC?

Por: James Bargent[1]

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Resumen

El presente texto realiza una reflexión sobre a quien se transmitió el dinero y el poder acumulado por las autodefensas unidas de Colombia (AUC), y para lo cual presenta algunos resultados referentes a las empresas y ganaderos que apoyaron el surgimiento y que hoy parecen ser los principales beneficiados de dicha situación. De dicha experiencia solo quedaron como perjudicados los de siempre: los campesinos, los dueños de las pequeñas parcelas y los miles de desplazados.

Palabras clave: Salvatore Mancuso, Montes de María, Héroes de los Montes de María, AUC, Águilas Negras, San Onofre, Ovejas El Carmen de Bolívar

Abstract

This paper reflects on who was sent the money and power accumulated by the self-defense groups of Colombia, and which presents some results concerning the companies and farmers who supported the rise and now seem to be the main beneficiaries of the situation. From that experience alone were as prejudiced as ever the farmers, owners of small parcels and thousands displaced.

Keywords: Salvatore Mancuso, Montes de Maria, Heroes of Montes de Maria, AUC, Black Eagles, San Onofre, El Carmen de Bolivar Sheep

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Imagen tomada de: http://www.vivelohoy.com/noticias/mundo/8048939/paramilitares-usaron-violencia-sexual-como-arma-en-colombia-video

In 1997, the notorious paramilitary kingpin alias "Salvatore Mancuso" met with landowners, ranchers and influential figures from Sucre and Bolivar to discuss how to combat the guerrilla groups controlling the region of Montes de Maria. The result was the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) block the "Heroes of Montes de Maria", which announced its arrival by committing 75 massacres in a two-year killing spree targeting not the guerrillas but the campesinos that they terrorized. After driving the guerrilla groups to the remotest parts of the region, the 15 municipalities that make up Montes de Maria became the personal fiefdoms of AUC chiefs alias' "Cadena", "Juancho Dique" and "Diego Vecino". Aided by the local security forces and politicians they kept in their pockets, the three exerted a social, economic and political stranglehold on the region enforced by extreme violence and casual cruelty. Throughout their rein thousands of campesinos were murdered while well over 100,000 were forced to flee their homes.

When the "Heroes of Montes de Maria" demobilised in 2005, it left behind a region traumatised by some of the worst atrocities in Colombia's long and bloody conflict. Into that region came a wave of Antioquian businessmen, who began snapping up the land at rock bottom prices. According to testimonies from local campesinos, many of the speculators followed on the heels of debt collectors or used confidential financial information to pressure residents to sell. Others would arrive after intermediaries had passed through issuing threats about the neo-paramilitary "Aguilas Negras" and what they would do to those who would not sell.

Following the land speculators came the businesses. Six years on from the demobilisation of the AUC and the landscape of Montes de Maria has changed. Smallholder and subsidence farming has been replaced by large scale agro-industrial enterprises - dairy, timber, African palm and teak – run by the handful of businesses that now own most of the land in Montes de Maria.

Monocrops and carbon trading in a conflict scarred region

The municipalities of San Onofre and Ovejas in Sucre and El Carmen de Bolivar in Bolivar were among the hardest hit by paramilitary violence in Montes de Maria. Between 1995 and 2005, there

were a reported 54 massacres in the three areas, and according to government agency Accion Social, 117,097 people have been displaced since the paramilitaries first arrived. These three municipalities are now the site of over 10,000 hectares of teak trees - commercial monocrop plantations belonging to one of Colombia's biggest companies – Argos S.A.

As well as income from timber sales, Argos is using its Montes de Maria plantations to capitalise on the lucrative international carbon trading market. The more than 2,000 hectares of teak in San Onofre has been approved for the UN's carbon trading scheme - the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). As a reforestation project, the plantation will earn carbon credits to sell to industrialised countries that can use them to meet their Kyoto Protocol CO2 emission reduction targets. The company say the plantation will capture 37,000 tonnes of CO2 per year for 25 years – worth approximately $12.5 million in the current carbon market. The company also hopes to gain CDM approval for the Ovejas/El Carmen plantation and to use it to earn credits in the voluntary carbon offset market.

In October last year, Polo Democratico Congressman Ivan Cepeda wrote to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon requesting he expel Argos from the CDM programme for failing to meet the UN's human rights standards. According to Cepeda, Argos and the other major landholders in Montes de Maria were the beneficiaries of a mass land grab based on paramilitary violence and they are now using projects such as the teak project to avoid restitution of those lands to displaced campesinos.

"These commercial reforestation projects have allowed these companies to conceal and disguise their activities," said Cepeda. "All of this is a big, sophisticated operation to legalise lands they have robbed from the campesinos."

He also believes the plantation's CDM status is being used to greenwash the land grab. "[This is] a business that it is presenting as clean," he said, "when in reality it is a business that is drenched in blood – the blood of campesinos that were the victims of massacres".

Argos strenuously denies profiting from paramilitary violence and insists the project is bringing much needed employment and investment to Montes de Maria. Camilo Abello, the Argos Vice-President of Corporate Affairs, said, "We believe that what we are doing is supporting, generating employment and generating social inclusion in a zone affected by violence."

The company insists it bought land at market prices without coercion or pressure and denies buying land from displaced people. According to Abello, the company only began to buy land after paramilitaries had left the region. "The Argos representative who made the purchases was able to go into the zone because there were no paramilitaries, there was no violence," he said.

Argos claims it bought the land for the San Onofre plantation in 2005, although documents show it made land purchases in 2003, 2005 and 2008. Government statistics on displacement show that nearly 2,000 people were forcibly displaced in 2005, more than in the previous two years. Over a thousand people were also displaced in 2006 and again in 2007. While murder and displacement rates have dropped sharply since then, government risk reports on San Onofre show a renewed and growing paramilitary presence in the area.

One San Onofre local, "Felipe", claims his family sold their San Onofre farm to Argos to flee the violence. "We had to sell the

Imagen tomada de: http://montesdemariamitierramidentidad.blogspot.com/

land because we were in an unbearable situation," he said, "our lives were in danger." According to Felipe, they had to ask permission from Cadena – the AUC chief whose headquarters were nearby – to sell and, although he knew of no formal contact between the AUC and Argos, paramilitaries visited the farm while the Argos representative was measuring the land.

In Ovejas and Carmen de Bolivar, Argos bought most of its land from the speculators who invaded the region after the AUC demobilisation; including José Alberto Uribe Munera who, according to locals' testimonies, bought land from demobilised AUC paramilitaries who had stolen it from displaced campesinos.

Most of Argos' land in the two municipalities came from members of the Amigos de Montes de Maria, a business group founded by prominent Antioquians including Mario Uribe, the cousin of former president Alvaro Uribe and a former senator convicted of ties to paramilitaries and Guillermo Gaviria Echeverri, the newspaper owner and banana magnate who has also been investigated for paramilitary links. Locals have accused Amigos de Montes de Maria of pressuring campesinos into selling their land and of being involved in evicting families from land purchased for agro-industrial projects. Since its formation, the group has bought approximately 60,000 hectares in the region.

In Ovejas, Argos bought land from Raul Morales, another co-founder of Amigos de Montes de Maria. According to testimonies collected for a report on the region by a coalition of Colombian NGOs, Morales' lands had been managed by Silvio Flores, an alleged demobilized AUC member who became the head of personnel of Argos subsidiary Reforestadora del Caribe after the purchase. Locals claim Flores has pressured campesino families to sell their land; abusing and threatening them, killing their animals and even burning down houses. There have been no formal complaints made against Flores, although locals claim this is from fear.

Many residents of the region are convinced the company has ties with local paramilitaries. In the NGO report, campesinos from Ovejas describe being threatened by heavily armed men in camouflage and with covered faces who claimed to be working for Argos as security. According to "Alberto", a campesino from Ovejas, Argos "... is strongly backed [by the paramilitaries] because they have their connections, so [the paramilitaries] guard their interests."

Argos denies any involvement with paramilitaries and claims it does not use security on its plantations. "This organization does not benefit from, nor participate in, encourage or promote

any illegal activities, much less paramilitary activities," said Abello.

The Victims Law - towards land restitution

With the land restitution process initiated by the Victims Law and Land Restitution Law now underway, all eyes are on Montes de Maria, where a recent report by the Superintendency of the Notary and Registry uncovered a trail of fraud and corruption linked to armed groups, businessmen, politicians and officials that allowed mass land theft to take place.

However, companies such as Argos are unlikely to have to give up the lands they have acquired. According to the terms of the Victims Law, a company does not have to return lands if they are being used for an agro-industrial project and the company can prove it bought them in good faith. Instead, the authorities will try and negotiate a financial agreement between company and the claimant.

For Ivan Cepeda, this loophole has been deliberately created to avoid land restitution that would harm the interests of big business. "The operation they [Argos] have done in the Montes de Maria is a clear example of how the government's proposed restitution with the Victims Laws is going to work," he said. "The lands are going to stay in the hands of these businesses because they have created very sophisticated mechanisms to make a mockery of the investigations into how they are going assign land."

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However, navigating the legal maze of land restitution is not the only issue land rights campaigners are facing. According to the authorities, the neo-paramilitary groups and criminal gangs the "Aguilas Negras", the "Rastrojos" and the "Paisas" are all growing in strength in Montes de Maria and land campaigners have become prime targets. In San Onofre alone, 2011 saw two land restitution campaigners murdered. Eder Verbal Rocha and Antonio Mendoza were both shot and killed in front of their families.

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