



Disinfections of vehicles at check points set up by the Guardia Cimarrona. Photo: Palenke Alto Cauca.

# COLOMBIA:

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Rays of hope and a 'March of Dignity'

The Palenke Alto Cauca is a regional governance body of the national organisation that represents the Black Communities of northern Cauca in Colombia. Cauca is among Colombia's most deadly regions and has also been one of the hardest hit by COVID-19.

Pre-pandemic, Cauca's Black and Indigenous communities were already in an extremely vulnerable and marginalised situation of day-to-day survival, caught in the crossfire of warring groups. Armed outlaws flock to the area to illegally mine gold, harvest illicit crops, and engage in extortion. Communities confront the land- and water-grabbing impacts of toxic sugarcane plantations that cover the most fertile areas of the valley, and the interests of large-scale miners and hydroelectric schemes.

When COVID-19 hit northern Cauca, communities experienced a magnification of impacts to their lands and safety. Those who could work continued to do so to put food on the table, exposing themselves to the virus. They had no choice. Those who could not work, left without their traditional farms, are going hungry. People are also suffering more acutely the respiratory effects of practices such as burning of sugarcane fields, which continue to be harvested and in full production.

Armed actors have taken advantage of COVID-19, attempting to impose 'social order' such as curfews, and instilling fear in people by engaging in ongoing massacres and selective murders, which are far easier when people are staying at home to quarantine.

In protest, Indigenous, Afro-Descendant and Campesino peoples marched from Cauca to the capital, Bogota, over 16 days in June and July 2020, in the 'March for Dignity'. Speaking as she marched, Francia Márquez, winner of the 2018 Goldman Environmental Award for Latin America, and more recently the first Black woman ever to position herself as a candidate to Colombia's 2022 presidential race, stated:

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***I invite women, I invite the Colombian people to raise their voices to stop this killing. Today we aren't only dying because of State abandonment in pandemic times. But they're also continuing to kill us in our territories; they're also killing our social leaders. Today people are not only dying because of institutional abandonment, but because racism continues.”***

In the midst of the onslaught of violence and the pandemic, the unarmed, autonomous Black Communities' ancestral Guardia Cimarrona made heroic efforts to control their ancestral territories and protect their people, setting up checkpoints to make sure bio-safety protocols were enforced on people entering their communities.

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***Everyone was trying to take refuge in our territory, in our communities,”*** says Guardia Cimarron Javier Peña. ***“They were coming from the cities like Cali, Popayán and Jamundi.”***

The eight checkpoints, at the entrance and exits of Buenos Aires, Suarez, and Santander de Quilichao, helped keep virus infection levels at zero for the three months. The Guardia attended their posts 24/7, often helped by community peoples in disinfecting vehicle tires and making sure anyone who entered followed bio-safety protocols. “It was a sensational opportunity to be supporting our communities,” Peña underscored, noting that many community members would like the Guardia to have checkpoints in place even following lockdown orders.

The Guardia also set up checkpoints in the urban area of Playa Renacientes—one of the Palenke's Consejos Comunitarios, the state-recognised governance bodies of Black Communities—near the city of Cali. This symbolic exercise of authority has been held up as an exemplar by the Black Governor of the Department of Cauca, and by members of the Cali police who reportedly provided the Guardia with refreshments at their checkpoints in this coordinated effort.

Palenke authorities are certain that these actions have kept the virus at lower levels in their communities. The actions have also helped bring deserved recognition to the institution of the Guardia Cimarrona and the authority of Black People over their collective territories. Rays of hope in an otherwise very bleak landscape of alarming rights violations.

Indeed, land-grabbing, issues around food sovereignty and violence against Black and Indigenous peoples are set to worsen as the Duque government continues to weaken implementation of the Peace Accords; rolls back rights protections for prior consultation and free, prior and informed consent; and looks to large-scale mining as a way out of the economic devastation that the pandemic has magnified.

1. (<https://www.facebook.com/ColombiaInforma/videos/pueblos-francia-marquez-da-un-saludo-de-apoyo-a-la-marcha-por-la-dignidad-llevad/287248762474392/>)