

## Letter to you from Calixto Suarez

The indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia have had to live with violence for many centuries. This hostility against our people seems to occur in a cyclical fashion, but some of the biggest acts of violence are happening at present.

Many of the indigenous peoples are asking why?

Maybe it is because we talk about respect for nature and our love for fellow human beings. Maybe for some of the perpetrators, it is their discomfort with our beliefs that the Sierra is a sacred territory, which we must protect.

Whatever the reasons, we fail to understand why the attacks, threats, killings, rape and plunder of our lands are occurring.

I grew up listening to my elders telling us the sad stories of the times of the conquistadores, and now I have to live as an adult firsthand with the violence, which has increased in recent years, depriving us of our land.

We feel powerless, as our land now belongs to private entities in the eyes of the law. We know these lands belong to us, and they are important to us, for our ability to feed ourselves and for their spiritual value. The sacred territory that has belonged to us for centuries has now been deeded to others; these are places where we used to do our ceremonies and rituals of harmonization.

We believe that the life and survival of humanity depends on these sacred places and their harmonizing energy must be maintained.

Just being who we are has resulted in many enemies threatening us continuously. They have killed our leaders who have tried to protect these sacred territories.

In 1990, three indigenous leaders of the Sierra were killed in a most awful way: gunmen kidnapped them and then tortured them to death. The result of the investigation showed that the murder was committed by members of the National Army of Colombia at the order of a number of wealthy families from Valledupar.

The black line, the border of our sacred indigenous territories, has not been respected. Today, as this is written, many, many projects are planned or on the drawing board: municipal expansions, the construction of dams, ports and hotels, and mining companies wanting to gain access and the use of our lands.

The argument put forward by the perpetrators is always that these projects will benefit the local or indigenous population. A recent example is the installation of multiplier antennae on our sacred territory.

Our experience has been that these are just promises to get our approval. Once completed, not only do these projects not bring benefits to our people, they deeply and adversely affect our way of life.

Our experience and our present concern is that, when proposed projects do not get a positive response from the indigenous peoples, the violence begins.

After the attack on Cabildo Rogelio a few days ago, it was inevitable not to remember the black period of the paramilitary, which resulted in untold spiritual, psychological, and cultural damage to the indigenous community.

The threats, the killings and the forced recruitment of children by paramilitaries produced social fractures in our communities that remain to the present day.

In areas near Valledupar, the paramilitaries have not only dispersed us from our territories, they have also created a bloody system which no longer allows us access to the law to reclaim what is ours or to try buying it back.

Their methods have been terror and intimidation. One of our spiritual leaders, who did not even speak Spanish, had his liver gouged out by them while still alive, and they then butchered him to death.

Our response - beyond our fear, which is only natural - has been that our men continue to work their *poporo* and *ayu*, and our women continue to knit our mochillas with a special knot: each node is love, and with each knot they weave in the world and our thoughts.

We have learned from past violence that there are alliances that protect us. This is why I am sending this communication to all of you who are willing to support us to avoid a new cycle of violence.

After the attack on the Cabildo Rogelio, we consider vital the support and assistance of the international community.

Do not leave us alone in our efforts to protect the Sierra Nevada and our culture and customs.

***The above letter was written by Calixto Suarez with the blessings of the following Mamos:***

***KUNCHANAWIGAMU - Mamo Mayor,  
PEDRO NIÑO - Mamo Mayor,  
KINGAMU NIÑO - Mamo Mayor,  
ADAN ALFARO – Mamo Mayor,  
HIPOLITO ZALABATA – Mamo Mayor***