

**OPEN LETTER TO THE MAYORS OF THE PACIFIC COAST OF NARIÑO ON THE
OCCASION OF THEIR MAY 3RD MEETING IN MOSQUERA MUNICIPALITY
AND TO THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN GENERAL**

The meeting of the municipal mayors of the Pacific Coast of Nariño represents an important opportunity for our Diocese to join with others in expressing our concerns over circumstances that are affecting our Afro-Nariño, indigenous and *mestizo* communities on a daily basis.

We are very concerned—and we cannot remain indifferent or worse, silent—about the following episodes that have an immediate impact as well as serious consequences for the future.

1. We have observed new and constant aerial fumigations in several areas of the Diocese, including the municipalities of El Charco, Olaya Herrera, Mosquera and Tumaco, that have caused harm to countless families. To give a specific example, in February of this year, the area of the indigenous community Eperara-Siapidaara Casa Grande of the San José Bacao Indigenous Reserve in Olaya Herrera municipality was fumigated five times in one week, destroying subsistence crops funded in part through an EcoFund project. Community representatives assert that there are no coca crops in their area. Of the 115 local residents, 45 children took ill with symptoms including vomiting, diarrhea, skin rashes, respiratory distress and pneumonia. In response to this emergency, the community requested a medical mission to the reservation. This was provided, but only in the urban center of Satinga, which is three hours away from the reservation, and only 15 of the sick children were seen. Because of the fumigation, the community is experiencing hunger: “We have nothing to eat and nothing to trade for fish.” The alarming food shortage raises fears of more health problems to come. The Casa Grande community suffered again when crops belonging to a neighboring community were fumigated on April 21 and 22, as the poison is carried by the wind. We are aware of an April 19, 2008, letter from the community councils and social and grassroots organizations of El Charco municipality in Nariño, addressed to the president of the Republic, condemning “the serious public calamity occasioned by the fumigations.” We echo the concerns expressed in the letter because the situation it describes is consistent with what the Catholic Church has observed during our visits to the communities. We are also particularly concerned by the April 9 death of an Awá indigenous child, 14 year old Janer Esteban Nastacuás Canticús, and the hospitalization of five more children from the Guayacana indigenous community in rural Tumaco municipality. The child died after exhibiting the same symptoms described above. The autopsy results are currently being analyzed.

2. Despite numerous communiqués, reports and complaints, and community appeals issued by the Diocese, as well as its actions to defend life, selective murders are still perpetrated on a daily basis, particularly in Tumaco municipality, but also in other areas of the Pacific Coast. The high numbers of victims registered last year have persisted during the first four months of this year. According to the forensic medical authorities, 98 people died violent deaths in Tumaco municipality. There has been a tangible increase in the presence of army troops and several communities in Tumaco have been militarized, and yet attacks against people’s lives and physical integrity persist. We cannot remain silent about the murder of a local resident, Mr. Jairo Javier Montaña Rengifo, age 33, by the National Police on April 21, at 10:30 p.m. in the municipal seat of Mosquera. Witnesses report that on the night of the incident the victim fired a revolver to scare off a dog that had attacked him. Notified by neighbors, the police arrived on the scene, attacked Jairo Javier and despite his pleas, murdered him by firing seven shots into his back as local residents, including children, looked on. The national and regional press report on a daily basis the many ways in which the powerful tentacles of drug trafficking have penetrated virtually all levels of society in our department and on the Pacific Coast. These are not

ideological struggles. They are a quest for economic advantage at any price, through easy money and control over territory and over the routes used by illegal commerce, while trampling human life and dignity.

3. This year marks the 15th anniversary of the enactment of Law 70 on Afro-Colombian identity which provides for the establishment of community councils and collective land titles for Afro-Colombian communities. We suggest that we take this as an opportunity to evaluate the processes that have taken place under this law and support them with renewed vigor at all levels. We are concerned that several factors are threatening the *real* autonomy and land tenure of Afro-Colombian communities: Illegal armed actors are severely constricting entire communities and stretches of river. This is the case, for example, in the populations of Bajo Río Mira in Tumaco municipality, as well as in areas of Francisco Pizarro and Mosquera municipality where paramilitary groups control everyone entering and leaving the territory and have subjected the population to various forms of coercion without any real response from the legal authorities, whose presence in the area is extremely limited. In other areas the FARC guerrillas are trying to establish their control over territories, thereby exposing the population to the terrifying prospect of clashes with the Army, massive displacement, and pressures relating to the type of economic activities they may or may not pursue. In recent years, settlers from different parts of Colombia have come to many areas, often with the involvement of the communities themselves, bringing with them economic and culture projects that differ greatly from local traditions. This has led to conflicts and divisions as peasant organizations have been formed parallel to the Community Councils, which seek organizational hegemony in their areas. There were reports in March that eight (8) members of the Community Council of Alto Mira y Frontera in Tumaco municipality do not feel safe in their territories and have been forcibly displaced.

By way of conclusion we want to express the following:

It is common knowledge that aerial fumigation has not been an effective method of sustainable coca eradication. We ask ourselves, then, why does the government persist in carrying out such activities? After numerous complaints of its impact on subsistence crops, the municipalities absolutely must strengthen their capacity and technical means to process the justifiable complaints of peasants so as to obtain compensation for them.

As members of civil society and particularly as followers of Christ, the Defender of life, we cannot allow ourselves to become inured to the selective murders perpetrated on a daily basis in our municipalities, and we must never come to consider murder as a lesser evil or as the only solution to conflicts and power struggles. It is our hope that these incidents will not be characterized by impunity and that the perpetrators will be investigated and punished under the law.

With regard to the threats against collective territories and the processes taking place in Afro-Colombian communities, aggravated by the history of government neglect, we appeal to the municipal authorities and to other government institutions to pay close attention to these communities, especially the most remote ones. We ask them to support the preparation of the Community Councils' Life Plans which are to be incorporated into the Municipal Development Plans so as to renew hope in the collective territories for a future characterized by a dignified life, good health and educational coverage, housing, public services and roads, in other words, tranquility and progress.

We have hope and we ask God's blessing so that through the unity of the municipalities of the Pacific Coast of Nariño, we can work with renewed strength, energy, transparency and wisdom, hand in hand

with civil society as a whole, on a common project to achieve integral well-being in this territory, which is the basis for a real and lasting peace.

Sincerely,

Mons. Gustavo Girón Higueta
Bishop of the Tumaco Diocese