

Colombian Indigenous Community Waits in Poverty as Courts Weigh Ownership of Ancestral Land

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In 2009 the Guahibo Indigenous community of El Trompillo was forced to move from what members say is their ancestral land.

The official owners of the land are reportedly connected to former senator Alfonso Mattos, and plantation companies affiliated with Mattos have been developed in the territory; sources say they are polluting the land, water and air.

El Trompillo community members hope the higher courts rule in their favor and return them to their land – but in the meantime they live in cramped, impoverished conditions.

This story is a collaboration between Mongabay Latam and Rutas del Conflicto in Colombia.

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Nearly 13 years have passed since the Guahibo Indigenous community El Trompillo was allegedly forcibly relocated from their territory. Members report persistent hunger and overcrowding in makeshift dwellings cobbled out of green canvas and garbage bags in the municipality of La Primavera in the Colombian department of Vichada. They say they still have hope of someday returning to their ancestral land 30 kilometers (19 miles) away, land that is officially owned by a former Colombian senator and his family and allocated for oil palm plantations.

“We are waiting for [agencies] to tell us that we can return, but in the meantime, they are damaging the land, our sacred places,” said one community member, who wished to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation.

Like this individual, almost all sources contacted for this story asked for their identity to be protected due to the violent conditions that exist in this part of Colombia. Over the past year, the presence of paramilitary-linked armed groups has increased, according to the

Department of Protection of Citizens' Rights; in their March 2021 report, the agency stated these groups include *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* [Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia] and the *Puntilleros Libertadores del Vichada* [Liberators of Vichada]. Alleged murders of land claimants in other parts of the eastern plains region of Colombia has also caused fear among Indigenous communities.



A typical dwelling in the El Trompillo community. Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

El Trompillo's claimed territory is located in the Altagracia, an extensive savannah of 130 square kilometers (50 square miles) between the Negro and Elvita rivers and surrounded by gallery forests and wetland ecosystems called *morichales*. The formal owners of the land are relatives and close associates of former senator Alfonso Mattos and their oil palm estates are managed by the companies Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada, which also belong to Mattos and his family. Alfonso Mattos is the brother of Carlos Mattos, who has a Spanish extradition request against him for bribing a judge, and the livestock farmer Edward Mattos, who has been [accused](#) of murder and links to paramilitarism in the departments of Cesar and Meta.

Indigenous community members say they have witnessed the mismanagement of waste by the oil palm companies occupying their land.

"They have a very large garbage dump; in some parts the water is very dirty because of the liquids they put on the oil palm, while other parts are full of bags and plastic," said one person who requested anonymity for safety reasons. A local official said he was able to verify waste management complaints, but requested that his name be withheld due to fear of reprisal.



Mongabay Latam and Rutas del Conflicto reporters observed discarded waste such as bags, tarpaulins and empty plastic containers in the Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada oil palm plantations.

Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

An environmental engineer who has worked for other oil palm companies in Colombia's Altillanura region confirmed evidence of solid waste mismanagement.

"There are regulations for the management of such waste," said the engineer, who requested anonymity. "From what these images [of Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada] show, they [the companies] are not complying with Decree No. 1076 of May 26, 2015, which provides directives for oil palm crop cultivation."

Complaints against the oil palm project first began in 2016. According to environmental regulatory agency Corporinoquia, Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada were sanctioned on May 16, 2016 and ordered to immediately suspend operation of its palm oil extraction plant "for not having environmental permits relating to atmospheric emissions." Corporinoquia also found the companies responsible for "dumping industrial wastewater without prior treatment." In August 2017, Corporinoquia representatives returned to the area and again found irregularities, for which it filed charges as part of an environmental sanctioning process.

Both Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada are owned by the family of former senator Alfonso Mattos, which includes his wife Ana Cecilia Lacouture and his children David Alfonso, Catherine and Stephanie Mattos Lacouture, per Chamber of Commerce records.



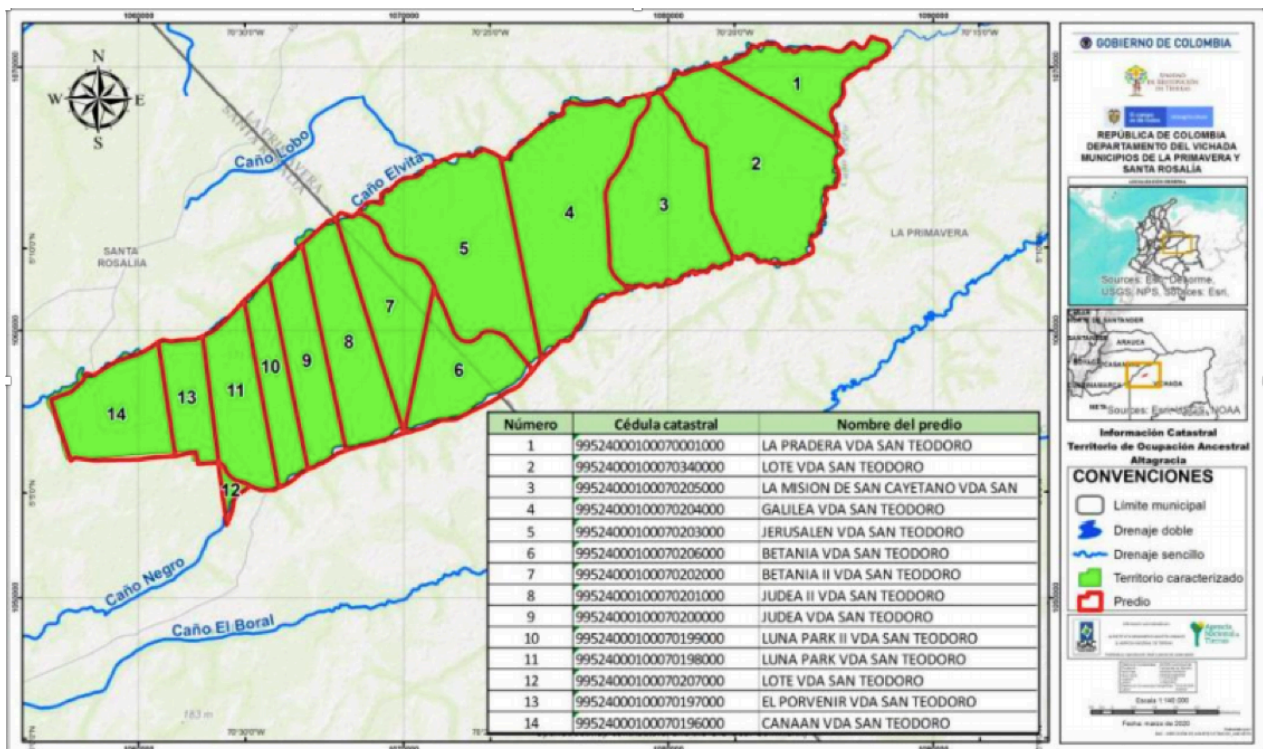
Indigenous children from the El Trompillo community. Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

In the mid-1990s, when the Guahibo community were still practicing a traditional semi-nomadic life, the 16th Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) arrived in San Teodoro, a town neighboring Altagracia, quickly turning it into a key location for drug trafficking.

Altagracia was divided into 14 plots by the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (Incora), which are currently being exploited by Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada. Among the farms operating in the area are San Cayetano and Judea, which are now reportedly owned by people with close links to former senator Alfonso Mattos.



Altagracia (brown area) is the Guahibo ancestral territory. The green area bordering it to the north is land cultivated with oil palm. Image from Google Earth.



The Guahibo territory has been divided into 14 plots. Image by the National Land Restitution Unit.

On May 3, 1999, a group of about 200 paramilitary members arrived in San Teodoro, a neighboring town of Altagracia, killing five people, including Eduardo Ríos, president of the

Community Action Board of San Teodoro.

Rumors spread that the armed group wanted to kill the Guahibo people: “They said that they were going to kill us, we were afraid at that time,” said a Guahibo community member who wished to remain anonymous for safety concerns.

Between 2005 and 2006, paramilitary groups in the area demobilized, giving way to the arrival of large agribusiness companies, a move promoted by the government of former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez.



Aerial shot of the Agrícola El Encanto oil palm plantation. Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

Guahibo community members said that they continued to live in Altagracia until 2008, when 20 armed men appeared and told them that the land had an owner and they were required to leave. Community members say the men said they represented Alfonso Mattos.

The incident prompted some from the community to move to Puerto Carreño, the capital of Vichada. But community members who stayed said that armed men returned, this time with Alfonso Mattos, to demand that those who remained leave the territory.

“We didn’t leave, but in August [2009] unknown individuals arrived and set fire to some farms. We couldn’t put up with it anymore so we came to La Primavera,” said a Guahibo community member.

Indigenous leaders, legally represented by Corporación Claretiana Norman Pérez Bello, have requested that the National Land Agency revoke the awarded plots. They also requested that the Land Restitution Unit formally hand over the 14 plots occupied by the companies to the Guahibo community.



Afternoon in El Trompillo. Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

In 1989, Colombia signed Convention No. 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), which protects and recognizes the collective property of Indigenous peoples' ancestral territories.

"From then on, several laws have been approved to give these communities titles for the land on which they have historically lived and developed their cultural practices," said Brayan Triana, a lawyer at the Land Observatory of the University of Rosario in Bogotá.

Mongabay Latam and Rutas del Conflicto contacted Alfonso Mattos by phone and WhatsApp to ask for his version of the story and also about the environmental protocols of Agrícola El Encanto and Aceites del Vichada. Messages were also sent to the emails of the two companies registered with the Chamber of Commerce. No responses were received.

In 2020, a judge ruled in favor of the Guahibo community's claim. However, those who claim ownership of the land opposed the ruling and the case will go to a higher court to ultimately determine to whom the land belongs. It is expected that this next step of the legal process will take several years.

In the meantime, the 32 displaced Guahibo families continue to hold on in El Trompillo. There they are joined other displaced Indigenous communities, including other Guahibo communities and groups such as the Cuiba and Piapoco. In total, 636 people live on 0.23 square kilometers (0.09 square miles).

The El Trompillo settlement is not the only one of its kind in this part of Colombia. Several other such as Puerto Gaitán and Puerto Carreño dot the region, creating belts of poverty in urban areas.

Overcrowding and hunger is rife. The Guahibo of Altagracia survive on the little work community members can find in La Primavera and on the sale of woven goods. “Sometimes there’s work for one day, but it’s not permanent. We also sell what the women make, but it’s not enough to provide food every day,” one community member said.



Crafts made by the weavers in the El Trompillo community. Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

A representative of Corporación Claretiana, who wished to remain anonymous, said agro-industrial and oil development for the region is sponsored by the State itself and completely excludes Indigenous residents. He said communities have been subjected to systematic violence to remove them from their territories for decades.

Sources said displacement may also have a detrimental impact on Indigenous cultures and exposes residents to public health and social problems such as drug addiction.

“We hope that our ancestral territory will be returned to us, along with our sacred sites, the animals, the streams, the trees – everything,” said a Guahibo community member who requested anonymity. “We can’t accept that they are damaging where we have lived for so long.”

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Featured image: Aerial shot of the Agrícola El Encanto oil palm plantation. Image by Juan Carlos Contreras Medina.

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