

Juni 2017

By Lucas Ochoa Roldán

In colonial times, many of the enslaved people who were violently brought from Africa to America got their freedom by their own hands. They fled to the mountains and jungles of what today is known as Colombia. These people were called "cimarrones", and, despite the multiple adversities they had to adapt to the new environment and to communicate among them, they managed to build their own way of living in small villages then called "palenques". Some of them were located between the Perijá mountains and the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, in the middle basin of the Ranchería river in La Guajira, northern Colombia. Over time, these communities became known as "rochelas", and were the shared home of blacks, indigenous Wayúus and mestizos who fled colonial power. These communities defended their territory and fought to remain free for more than 400 years before many adversities. First they had to deal with the permanent pressure of the slave armies. Then, although slavery was "abolished" in 1852, it is no secret that blacks do not (yet) enjoy the same rights as the rest of the citizens.

The "development" displaced them. It did what no army in 400 years could achieve, to strip the communities of their territories. Huge deposits of thermal coal were discovered beneath the land inhabited by the Wayúu and afro communities. In 1976, the Colombian government granted concessions for the extraction of coal in La Guajira. Then in 1984 began the stage of exploitation of what would soon be one of the largest open-cast coal mines in the world. Thermal coal is the second most widely used energy source in the world after oil. Today, about 32 million tonnes of coal are exported from El Cerrejón to all continents every year (Europe 46%). Since 2002, the company is called Carbones del Cerrejón limited, and has operating permit until 2034.

Initially (1976), the State had a 50% share of the project. But more than 20 years ago its part was sold and today the company belongs in its totality (100%) to 3 foreign companies: Glencore (Switzerland), BHP Billiton (Australia) and Anglo American (UK) ([www.cerrejon.com](http://www.cerrejon.com))

The mine, to achieve its exploitation, has stripped 35 communities between Wayúu, Afro-wayúu and Afro. Early, the INCORA (Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform), gave to the guajira families titles of the land they had inhabited for years. This favored the company, which persuaded them to sell at very low cost with the promise that the mine would bring great benefits to them and the nation. According to the agrarian reform, these territories had to have exclusively agricultural vocation, but they were illegally acquired for the exploitation of coal. Those who did not want to sell and defended their permanence in the territory, were forcibly evicted. Of the 35 deprived communities, only 5 have been partially resettled.

The company has not kept promises of decent housing, work, entrepreneurship of productive projects, education and health. (Díaz et al, 2015)

La Guajira nowadays lives an alarming humanitarian crisis, being the 2nd poorest department of Colombia.

In the bed of the Ranchería lie more than 500 million tons of coal. That's why the mine has been trying to appropriate it, despite the fact that it is the only river in La Guajira. The same has happened with more than 9 streams that feed it. In 2015 the necessary permits were granted to the mine to initiate the diversion of 3.6 km of the Bruno stream, an important tributary of the Ranchería river, to extract more than 35 million tons of coal. Thousands of voices have risen against this diversion that affects the fragile ecosystem of the area and several communities, but the company intends to divert 9.2 km more of the Bruno stream and other tributaries of the Ranchería.

The mine has been violently changing the customs, autonomy and ancestral relationship of the Guajira communities with their land. The discourse of development as a source and mechanism of displacement is achieving what no army could in more than 400 years.

#### Bibliography:

- Ramírez Díaz, Roberto et al. (2015). *Bárbaros hoscós: historia de la (des)territorialización de los negros de la comunidad de Roche*. Consejo Comunitario Ancestral del Caserío de Roche CINEP/PPP. Bogotá
- Fierro Morales, Julio; Llorente Valbuena, Ana María. (2016). *Consideraciones ambientales acerca del proyecto carbonífero de El Cerrejón, operado por las empresas BHP Billiton, Angloamerican y Xstrata en La Guajira*. TERRAE. Bogotá.
- [www.cerrejon.com](http://www.cerrejon.com)