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The Amazon NATO and debt swap for nature



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On August 8 and 9 in the city of Belém, capital of the State of Pará in Brazil, where the Amazon River flows, the largest and longest in the world, the delegations of Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Suriname and Guyana, the eight countries that make up the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO). with the aim of coordinating strategies for the conservation of this region, specifically, combating deforestation in the Amazon rainforest.

In this high-level meeting, they highlighted the agreements contained in the Declaration of Belem composed of 112 points in which it was concretized to work on the institutional strengthening of ACTO; regional integration around the Amazon rainforest; science and education; monitoring and cooperation in water resources; climate change; the protection of forests, Amazonian coastal areas, vulnerable ecosystems and biodiversity; police and

judicial cooperation in the fight against illicit activities and environmental crimes; sustainable economies, among others. (1)

However, apart from the conclusions, attention was drawn to the proposals pointed out by President Gustavo Petro, who insisted on the exchange of debt for climate action, the creation of a court of justice to judge environmental crimes against the Amazon, the formation of an "Amazonian NATO" and a multilateral center for scientific research. These proposals, far from being eco-friendly and environmentalist, hide particular interests and contradictions that are worth unmasking.

Debt for Climate Action: Petro's Call to the World in the Face of Environmental Collapse

This proposal before the Amazon Summit is not new, in all the international scenarios in which Petro has participated, this has been one of his main green flags before the world. In Belém, the president said:

"What could we contribute? Well, in South America what we can contribute precisely, among other options, is to take care of this forest, but really. Taking care of this forest implies us not only thinking about zero deforestation (...) here we have to launch a proposal, which is not asking for money, (...) that is why we have launched a proposal that is in the declaration (...) which is to change debt for climate action "(2).

Although it may sound quite consistent with global needs in environmental matters, and the debt problems that South American countries are going through. In the first place it is not an innovative proposal, this action has been configured since the 1980s as a mechanism through which the United States, the IMF, the World Bank and other financial organizations, agree an agreement with the indebted country, through which the burden of public debt is reduced under the condition that this country invests in the conservation of its environment (3). Vargas (2023) explains it very clearly:

"The mechanism works as follows: the United States sells part of a country's foreign debt to an American NGO, and in turn, the NGO contracts a debt with the financial sector becoming the new creditor. In return, the NGO asks to invest the interest on the debt in local currency in conservation initiatives." (4)

Secondly, in practice with this "debt-for-nature swap, imperialist domination is reinforced, natural resources are privatized, the way is opened to the commodification of jungles and forests, the entry of biopirates from the United States is allowed, while this country presents itself worldwide as the protector of nature" (5). This is evidenced to the extent that private NGOs are the ones that enter to mediate the exchange, but what is very little

known is that these NGOs are really the green facades of the large multinationals that come for the resources of our countries.

A recent example of this can be seen in our neighboring country, Ecuador, which has recently signed a debt swap with the IDB and the United States Development Finance Corporation (DFC) in exchange for the long-term marine conservation of the Galapagos Islands, an agreement that is considered "the largest debt-for-nature conversion in the world" (6). As it reads, the Galapagos Islands, the earthly paradise of the Ecuadorian Pacific -which Charles Darwin himself visited and which inspired the development of his work *The Origin of Species*-, delivered on a silver platter to the IDB and the DFC. What nonsense and abruptness it is to leave the care of the environment and nature to financial capital. Is this what President Petro wants with the Amazon? Do you dream and firmly yearn to hand over the Amazon rainforest to the IMF? Last year at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Petro mentioned:

"If the IMF helps swap debt for concrete action against the climate crisis, we will have a thriving new economy and a new life for humanity. Colombia will place its international emphasis on reaching the most ambitious agreements possible to curb climate change and defend world peace. We are not with war. We are with Life" (7)

Even in the last visit of the Colombian president to Washington where he met with Biden (whom he set as an example at the Amazon Summit as global leaders committed to climate change), Biden said that the US will transfer the proposal to change foreign debt for climate action to the IMF and also committed US\$500 million for the revitalization of the Amazon (8). It seems that we are not so far from the scenario of our neighbor Ecuador, since at the end of May, also from Brazil, the renegade environmentalist now Minister of Environment, Susana Muhamad said:

"There is one of how we work a debt-for-nature swap or a refinancing of debt for nature, for protected areas and environmental projects in the country. There we are working with private banks and the Inter-American Development Bank and we have an important potential to generate that mechanism gives us resources for the environmental sector" (9)



Photo taken from the website of the chancellery.

Added to this, among the points of the Declaration of Bethlehem was stipulated in point 33:

"Promote innovative mechanisms for financing climate action, among which could be considered the swap, by developed countries, of debt for climate action;"

It is demonstrated then, that the government headed by Gustavo Petro insists on the neoliberal measure of exchanging foreign debt for nature, or as he calls it: "climate action". At this point, there are some questions to consider: Should the countries of the global south bear most of the responsibility for urgent solutions to climate change? Knowing that countries like Colombia are the ones most exposed to climate change, are they the ones who should bear the responsibility and resources to lead climate action? Are they the biggest polluters? It is these countries that are going to have to face the consequences of climate change in a worse way, and yet Petro sells to the world the idea that the poorest and most indebted countries like ours, have to be the ones that do the most to stop the global warming produced by the powers and the most developed countries.

Instead of obediently receiving Washington's directive, Petro should learn a little more from his counterpart Lula Da Silva, president of Brazil, who openly, and even in the face of the head of the IMF, condemned the debt to these organizations for suffocating countries like Argentina and the South Americans (10). Demanding the exchange of debt for climate action ultimately results in perpetuating this neocolonizing mechanism of foreign debt, "it is **not a cancellation of debt, but it is a conversion, an exchange towards new debts**. Environmental protection is only a pretext, a cover. New creditors are indirectly seeking profit." (11)

The guideline for environmental policy and the defense of our ecological riches also involves condemning imperialist and neo-colonizing mechanisms such as foreign debt,

questioning their legitimacy, and above all denouncing the *ecological debt* that the powers and countries of the North have towards the underdeveloped countries and the countries of the global south. Innocently exchanging our resources, our forests, our forests, our nature, our biodiversity for debt cannot be an option, much less our task in the face of the environmental crisis.

An Amazonian NATO

"What I am trying to do is to take the dialogue with the US to a different axis, which is the issue of the climate crisis (...) what it is to take NATO to the care of the Amazon rainforest by providing technological collaboration in this regard. With the U.S. we have managed to create the first military unit with helicopters of these Black Hawk "... (12)

During the year that Petro has been in office, he has met constantly with the Chief of the Pentagon's Southern Command, General Laura Richardson, who has been very explicit and at the same time blatant in the interest on the part of the United States in the great resources that our region has, let's see:

*"But why is this region important? With all its rich resources and rare earth elements, you have the lithium triangle, which is necessary for today's technology. 60% of lithium is in the lithium triangle: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile. You have the largest oil reserves, sweet and light crude discovered in Guyana more than a year ago. You have Venezuela's resources also with oil, copper, gold. We have the lungs of the world, the Amazon. We also have 31% of the world's fresh water in this region. I mean, it's out of the ordinary. *We have a lot to do. This region matters. It has a lot to do with national security and we have to step up our game"* (13)*

What does Richardson mean by "stepping up our game"? What piece does Colombia play on this board? These are questions that anyone would ask when listening to the imposing tone with which this general speaks when referring to South American resources. However, for our president, Laura Richardson has become one of the guests of honor at the Casa de Nariño, and in this regard she has not heard any complaint or criticism against the announcements of the aforementioned general, on the contrary, among their frequent meetings they have reached the agreement to bring NATO to the Amazon jungle,

"I proposed to the general the construction of a force, which she already told me she had an outline in Brazil, a Military Force with helicopters, etc., but destined to put out the fires of the Amazon rainforest, which is the main security problem of humanity today," Petro said during the event. (14)

See then that his proposal to create now an "Amazon NATO" is not new, it was agreed long ago with the head of the Southern Command, and as a sign of good faith, the United States provided in October 2022 to the Colombian government 12 Black hawk helicopters to "protect the Amazon", which Petro called "The Macaws" to refer to the fleet of helicopters donated by the Empire. (15)



Photo: Presidency of Colombia

Are we witnessing the green face of imperialism for Colombia? Since when has the U.S. provided its military arsenal to protect forests? With absolute error, Petro tries to convince us that the United States and characters like Biden or Richardson have on their horizon the care of the environment. But as a good student of the Pentagon, the Colombian president took this proposal to the Belém Summit, where he said:

"I would propose to them a military, military and judicial treaty, (...) How do we defend life? that is defended with reasons but also with weapons, and then we should create an Amazon NATO, a military cooperation treaty, to interdict what goes against the Amazon rainforest in our countries, obviously respecting our sovereignty, (...) and to that extent I think there is a meeting of defense ministers that would be important to see if we could reach this type of military agreement." (16)

It is worth recalling the imperialist and criminal character of a body like NATO, which, being a military force that safeguards the security and interests of the United States and the Western powers, has perpetrated multiple war crimes, human rights violations, and has acted arbitrarily as the world's policeman. Will it be a military force of this character with which Petro thinks to take care of the Amazon rainforest?

In such a way, it seems that the militarist approach has not left politics with the "government of change", on the contrary, examples such as the military project on our Gorgon Island (financed by the US) show that this government, although before the world

remains as a radical head of state in environmental matters, in reality continues with the approach dictated from Washington, who has in mind all kinds of interest, except the protection and conservation of the environment.

Before Petro's proposal at the summit, the vice president of the Republic of Venezuela, rightly pointed out:

"The third great threat: the aspirations of the 'otanizacion' to guarantee the commodification of the biodiversity of the Amazon Basin," he said, while calling for "reflection because sooner or later the time will come where the interests of this organization will be in opposition to the interests of the peoples of the North Atlantic." (...) So how can there be US military bases, European "NATO" in our countries when we know that strategically the countries of the North Atlantic already have their sights set on resources: water, biodiversity of this extensive territory (...)." (17).

It is worth asking the president: Is this the world power of life that he promised the Colombian people in the campaign? Is it with NATO, helicopters, and the gringo militarist dictate that the Amazon and nature are defended? Government of the nobodies or Government of the Yankees?

Green siren songs: Petro's bet on the world in the face of the climate crisis

Finally, the last proposal launched by our champion and savior of the environment was to create a "common scientific research center on the jungle", a proposal that has all the relevance for the case, without research and scientific knowledge it is not possible to conserve and protect the Amazon rainforest. But here it is necessary to remember "the importance" that this government has given to science, research and technology, since it is projected for the General Budget of the Nation 2024 a reduction of 35% in the Science budget in relation to 2023, that is, "with the resources that the Minciencias would receive, the percentage of GDP for this sector does not even reach 0.5%, which is why the Ministry talks about leveraging private investment" (18).

Is a government that in practice and with facts shows its country that there are no resources or investment for science, but that boasts of selling to the ACTO countries and the world, that science should be bet on for the defense of the Amazon rainforest, really coherent?

In short, we are witnessing a militaristic policy, linked to the US Empire and international financial capital, which although camouflaged as green, disguises itself as ecological and protectionist, hides within it the minimum interest in the conservation of the Amazon rainforest, the defense of the environment, and real solutions to the climate crisis.

President Petro has reached the virtuosic art of being a progressive environmentalist in word and being a lackey of Yankee imperialism in fact. With extreme charlatanism, Petro is wrong in the direction that the South American peoples should take in the defense and conservation of their natural wealth. Therefore, "that is exactly the kind of leadership that humanity does NOT need at this time," as renowned Hollywood actor Mark Ruffalo (the Hulk of the Avengers) would comment to correct it.

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