International Day Against Tree Monocultures

As in previous years, this September 21 will be observed around the world as the International Day Against Tree Monocultures. The day is aimed at raising awareness and strengthening opposition to the expansion of these “green deserts” of trees by highlighting the impacts of this production model on the millions of people affected by them.

The specific tree species chosen for these monoculture plantations varies, depending on the objectives of the companies that promote and establish them. Pine and eucalyptus plantations are aimed at supplying raw material for the pulp and paper industry; teak, pine and gmelina are grown for the timber industry; oil palm plantations feed the agrofuel industry; rubber tree plantations are geared towards supplying the automotive industry; and various species (especially eucalyptus and pine) are used for plantations marketed as carbon “sinks” in the carbon trade business.

The social and environmental impacts of monoculture tree plantations are many and pose serious threats to the soils, water, flora and fauna. But the most dramatic impact of these plantations stems from their occupation of the territories of indigenous, traditional and peasant farming communities. Stripping these communities of their ancestral lands means stripping them of the vital resources and means of survival these lands formerly provided them with.

The plantation companies’ occupation of these territories is in many ways similar to a military invasion. As in the case of conventional invasions, the company owners and national government leaders responsible for the invasion do not carry it out themselves. The invasion begins with the arrival of company emissaries, who promise peace, jobs, wealth and development. They are followed by government officials, announcing that an agreement has been signed with the company that will benefit the local population enormously, and calling for their cooperation.

Once this stage is complete, the actual invasion begins. The first step is the destruction of local vegetation through the use of heavy machinery and toxic agrochemicals. And then, finally, the invading army arrives: endless columns of trees planted in rows that advance relentlessly across the local landscape.

These invasions sometimes come up against initial resistance. But even when they don’t, as time passes, and all the promises are eventually shown to be lies, the resulting impacts make resistance almost inevitable.

Whether the resistance comes before or after the invasion, once it emerges, the invaders adopt the classic strategy of “divide and conquer”, pitting community members against one another. If this doesn’t work, they move on to the next step: repression, whether directly through their own security guards, or with the support of the repressive state apparatus (the police, the courts, the army), which is quickly set in motion to come to the aid the government’s ally.

In a great many cases, the result is the violation of a wide array of human rights, which in the most serious cases can mean imprisonment, torture, and even murder.

Essentially, the establishment of these large-scale monoculture tree plantations amounts to a war on the peoples and on nature. The mighty green army invades, destroys and cracks down on local populations, whose only “crime” is defending what is rightfully theirs from the invader.

That is why, this September 21, we want to pay tribute to all the peoples who are struggling to defend their territories, and launch a call to step up the efforts to support them in the just defence of their rights.