Paraguay: Deforestation violates human rights of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation

The situation of the Ayoreo people of the Chaco region of Paraguay serves as an excellent illustration of the fact that forest conservation is a human rights issue. It also very clearly demonstrates that the protection of forests should be placed in the hands of those who have the greatest stake in their preservation: the indigenous peoples who depend on them for their survival.

Just like back in the days of the Spanish Conquest, it was missionaries who paved the way for the theft and destruction of the forests that had been used sustainably for centuries by the Ayoreo people. In the words of Mateo Sobode Chiquenoi, president of the Union of Ayoreo Natives of Paraguay (UNAP):

“It was the missionaries who made it impossible for us to continue living in our territory. Beginning in the late 1950s, Mennonite missionaries, evangelical missionaries from the United States and Catholic missionaries moved all of the Ayoreo out of the lands where we used to live. It was as if the missionaries used their evangelization to clear the territory that belonged to the Ayoreo people. That made it easy for the cattle ranchers to buy up almost all of our land, and a few powerful white men took over our territory just like that.”

For the Ayoreo, like their indigenous sisters and brothers throughout the Americas, contact with “civilization” resulted in death from diseases to which they had never before been exposed, which meant they had developed no immune defences against them. Mateo Sobode recalls that “when my father went to where the white people were, that was the end of him. Another 85 Ayoreo died of measles along with my father just after the first contact.”

But in addition to “dropping like flies” from contagious diseases after contact, those who managed to survive were faced with the fate of “living without freedom and without respect, living like paupers.”

Perhaps for this reason, a number of groups of Ayoreo people refused to be “civilized” by the missionaries and chose to continue their centuries-old way of life in voluntary isolation.

“There are still Ayoreo who shun all contact with the outside world. They live in the territories where all of us used to live. You white people call them ‘forest dwellers’ or ‘Indians in voluntary isolation’. They have maintained the same way of life that they have always followed, which is our traditional culture. We know that there are at least six uncontacted groups of Ayoreo living in Paraguay,” stated Mateo Sobode.

However, “civilization” continues to advance relentlessly, destroying the forests that lie in its path, whether to clear the land for cattle ranching or to explore for the highly coveted resource of oil.

Viewed from a purely climate change-related perspective, this is an environmental crime. Deforestation implies releasing into the atmosphere all of the carbon dioxide stored in the forest biomass. The introduction of cattle farming means the emission of huge amounts of another

greenhouse gas: methane. And of course, if oil is discovered, it will signify a new source of fossil fuel to be burned, further increasing the total amount of carbon dioxide in the biosphere.

But viewed from the wider perspective of human rights, the advance of deforestation implies the violation of the right to life of the last uncontacted members of the Ayoreo ethnic group – who depend entirely on the forest for their physical and cultural survival – and the violation of the land rights of this whole region's aboriginal peoples.

"These groups are in great danger. Ever larger areas of forest are being cleared for cattle ranching throughout the northern Chaco," warned Mateo Sobode. Those responsible for this destruction, he said, are "Brazilians, Dutch, Uruguayans, Mennonites and also Paraguayans who are buying up all of our territory, with no consideration whatsoever for our sisters and brothers in the forests."

Added to this is the destruction caused by oil prospecting. The forests have already been divided into grids for seismic testing, causing drastic alterations for the Ayoreo living in voluntary isolation. Even worse, after completing the first phase of exploration in the region, the UK company CDS Energy announced in May of this year that it had discovered oil and gas reserves in the Paraguayan Chaco. Unless immediate and effective measures are taken, this could result in the total extermination of the remaining uncontacted groups.

As Mateo Sobode rightly maintains, "These groups have the right to legal ownership of the territories where they are living. The right to self-determination of our people in the forests should also be respected. The laws must be enforced as well. For example, it should be prohibited to enter or work in these areas, and to sell the land where they are living, to ensure that they are left in peace. They are not interested in living with any missionaries or white people. All they want is to live in their own habitat, with the gods who are known only to the Ayoreo, and they have the right to decide how they want to live. If they want to come out they will come out, but in the meantime they must not be pressured. They have their way of life in harmony with the forest. The forest, Eami, gives them what they need and protects them, and they take care of the forest. Before the white men came, we Ayoreo lived in our territory without changing the face of our mother, the forest, Eami."

The measures needed to ensure both the conservation of the forest and the survival of the last Ayoreo who use it sustainably are simple: the enforcement of the laws, regulations and international agreements that protect indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation.

We hope that the Paraguayan government will heed the call of the Ayoreo, who are "calling on the competent authorities to stop allowing the continuation of the human slaughter of our uncontacted sisters and brothers who are living in their own territory and their own culture. We do not want their culture, our culture, to die."

At the same time, we hope that the governments of Paraguay, the Netherlands, Uruguay, Germany, Brazil and the United Kingdom will take action to stop the criminal activities committed by their corporations – against the indigenous people and against the climate of the entire planet – in the Paraguayan Chaco.

And finally, we also hope that the international community will join in the struggle to demand the respect of the right of these indigenous people in voluntary isolation to "decide how they want to live" and to be able to do so in the forests that belong to them.

Information extracted from: "Paraguay: el caso Ayoreo". Unión de Nativos Ayoreo de Paraguay,

Iniciativa Amotocodie. Informe IWGIA 4 (soon to be translated into English)
http://www.wrm.org.uy/pueblos/El_caso_Ayoreo.pdf