
Amazonia: The right of indigenous peoples to live in voluntary isolation

In her article “Peoples hidden in the forest: the right to live in their own Amazon? (*), the Argentine writer, Elina Malamud explores with great sensitivity the conditions that have led numerous forest peoples to voluntarily choose isolation. The author quotes the words of Sydney Possuelo, a Brazilian champion of the struggle in defence of the rights of indigenous groups to continue living their way of life: “If we were more decent, there would be no peoples in isolation, but our behaviour has led them to seek protection from us. Their isolation is not voluntary, it is forced by us.”

The Amazon – coveted since the Spanish conquest for gold, then rubber, oil, precious woods – was greedily appropriated by adventurers and merchants who left among the inhabitants a trail of disease, death and disintegration. Today, major works linked to development projects (such as the trans-Amazon highway and hydroelectric dams) together with agro-industrial expansion, continue to have the same devastating effects on the physical and cultural integrity of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon.

Possuelo, who is a first hand witness of how “integration” operates, tells us “Contact brings with it group de-structuring, artificial needs – if you give them clothes, then you must give them soap to wash with” – personal lack of control, drunkenness, prostitution, destruction, because the worst of all were the epidemics that we cure every day with a pill, but for the Indians from the heart of the forest lacking any immunological defence they mean death without any remedy, alone, abandoned in the forest by their brothers.” “Since 1987, I changed from contact to protection, that is to say, to no contact, to the right to isolation as the best way to preserve them.”

These indigenous groups, because of their lifestyle are self-sufficient in their own environment and – insofar as this is not altered – live in the abundance of what the forest gives them: “hunting, fishing, fruit and timber combined with slash and burn farming, resources from the flora and fauna that their cultural practices and low demography allow to be renewable.”

The groups that have chosen isolation have the right to do so, recognized by the United Nations. And the author argues that, in addition to this, they “have the right to political and legal recognition by the National States, to the collective ownership of their lands, their resources, their genes, their cultural knowledge.”

We all have the responsibility of recognizing and defending their rights and of preventing the continuation of stories of genocide and death of the peoples and the forests.

(*) Only available in Spanish: “Pueblos ocultos en la selva ¿Derecho a vivir la propia Amazonía?”, Elina Malamud, 5 February 2008. <http://www.ecoportal.net/content/view/full/75895>

