
Argentina: Chaco – land clearance, undernutrition and death

During the first fortnight of July, a wave of very cold weather crossed Argentina. In the warm lands of the Chaco Province, where the mean annual temperature is around 20°C, temperatures fell below freezing. This abrupt drop highlighted by deaths the full dimension of the health and food emergency affecting Toba, Mocovi and Wichi indigenous peoples in that north-eastern district of the country, where health is undermined by malnutrition, tuberculosis and Chagas' disease. In a matter of days 10 people had died, by 2 October the toll went up to 16, mainly from the Toba people. All the victims lived in El Impenetrable, a forest region which has been suffering from the ransacking of its quebracho (*Schinopsis balansae*), algarrobo (*Prosopis nigra*) and lapacho (*Tabebuia ipe*) trees for the past hundred years. Over the past decades, they have disappeared under mechanical diggers and the fires of those seeking the high profitability of soybean cultivation.

As from 1995 the Province started selling most of its public land. At that time it had 3 million hectares and presently only some 580 thousand remain. The transfer of public land to large landowners was a prior requisite to its subsequent clearance. The Chaco human rights organization **Centro de Estudios Nelson Mandela** (Nelson Mandela Centre for Studies) reported in November 2006, that over the past years, the Province's Forestry Office had dismantled its administrative and operational structure. *"The State has a laissez-faire policy regarding the sector. The law is a closed book. Decree 1341, which suspended the granting of land clearance permits until the finalization of the Chaco land planning operation, is neither applied nor respected. Not only does land clearance continue but it is stepped up. It is all a scandalous picture, marked by destruction and impunity,"* warned a public declaration of this same organization on 20 October 2006.

This process mainly affected El Impenetrable forest, which stretches from the west of the Province and is the ancestral land of the Toba and Wichi. The disappearance of the forest has led to the disappearance of animal and plant proteins from the diet of these peoples. *"The algarrobo symbolizes almost everything because the indigenous peoples obtained most of their proteins from its fruit. The disappearance of these trees has meant that they must now sustain themselves with fat, flour, sometimes a little pasta, not always and less and less with some rice, and hardly ever with some meat. So this diet has led to undernutrition, to hypertension and diabetes. Because of malnutrition or undernutrition, of never having enough food or only scantily nourishing food, this has led to infectious diseases, to tuberculosis and Chagas' disease,"* stated **Rolando Nuñez**, coordinator of the **Centro Mandela**, during an interview last August.

Since April last year, the Toba, Wichi and Mocovi peoples have been denouncing this situation and demanding public policies from the Provincial government. They have been blocking roads, camping outside the local Government seat. They have also gone on a hunger strike. After decades of silence, the '*levantamiento*' (uprising) – as they call it – highlighted the extreme poverty and discrimination affecting the approximately 60 thousand indigenous people in the Chaco. They came out of their silence, but the agreements signed with the government in August 2006 were not complied with.

The extreme situation in which the communities find themselves was denounced by the Peoples'

Defender, who brought action before the Supreme Court of Justice against the national and provincial States for their responsibility in this situation. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission has requested further documentary information over a report of genocide. Three months after the start of the death wave, the authorities have only bothered to implement temporary food assistance, without addressing the roots of the emergency.

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