Ecuador: Indigenous peoples close to extinction because of illegal logging

On 27 April 2007, following a visit to the Amazon region, the President of the Republic, Mr. Rafael Correa decreed a ban on timber extraction from this area because of the imminent disappearance of the country's native forests. In spite of this declaration, the extraction of cedar wood in the Yasuni National Park (YNP) and in the Intangible Zone continues non-stop.

The Yasuni National Park and the Intangible Zone are the territory of the Tagaeri/Taromenane Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation (IPVI). The invasion of their territories by oil and logging companies and tourists has placed these peoples in danger of extinction. To date, various measures have been set out on paper to avoid this happening, but have not been implemented.

In a visit to the Intangible Zone, members of the Huaorani People together with Accion Ecologica campaigners verified the presence of various crews of loggers extracting cedar wood from the dense forest. The situation of these men is so precarious that they have no other alternative than placing their lives at risk in order to obtain an income to survive on. Those who benefit and control the timber business in Yasuni are not these daily labourers who risk their lives, but the logging companies safe in comfortable and influential positions, manipulating their strings of power.

At the bridge over the Shiripuno River, deep draught canoes loaded with crews of labourers, fire-arms, chain-saws and mules easily penetrate into the forest to extract cedar wood planks, a highly appreciated timber because of its quality and scarcity.

In this part of the Amazon region, Presidential Declarations or Delimitation of Intangible Zone Decrees or the ban on cedar and mahogany logging issued by the Minister of the Environment on 11 February 2007, do not count. They do not count because there is no-one to implement these measures. So far no coordination has been established between the responsible authorities and ministries, there are no checkpoints on the highways nor at the Park entrance, nor at the ports, the forestry system continues to be deficient and corrupt, and timber circulates merrily towards Guayaquil to be exported or to Tulcan for the Colombian market.

Navigating along the Shiripuno River we found two large canoes calmly going down river with their passengers towards the timber camps installed in the forest. The signs of invasion are visible and clear in the middle of the forest: plastic, trash and large blocks of cedar planks floating along the river-side and semi-concealed along its banks.

A clandestine sawmill is located near the Cononaco River, the planks were piled up waiting for "their owners" to come and collect them. Close to this place various attacks by the Tagaeri/Taromenane have taken place to defend their territory from the invaders. In spite of the risk of further confrontations, cedar continues to be extracted from this site.

The trip continued along the Shiripuno until reaching the Huaorani community of Boanamo. Opposite the landing stage was a canoe which was being loaded with wooden planks that arrived in a smaller

vessel along the narrow Boanamo River. Three men unloaded the timber and then returned upriver.

The people from Boanamo stated that another Huaorani called Ike from the Tigüino community had ordered this timber to be removed. They had not negotiated with Boanamo and entrusted the guide for this trip to ask Ike when he came out whether it was true the timber was his.

Fifteen people live in Boanamo. The chief of the community is Omayegue. Neither he nor his wife speak Spanish. Nor are they in agreement with the extraction of timber from their territory. During the afternoon and the night we spent with the community, we spoke with Nantu Guaponi, our guide for this trip, about his disagreement with timber extraction and his willingness to find economic alternatives for the community.

According to the conversations held with this community, the Taromenane live a few hours trek away from Boanamo. Omayegue knows the routes and even spends whole weeks travelling over the territory, just as the Huaorani people have done for thousands of years.

We travelled some 15 minutes up-river along the mouth of the Tiwino until we found an inhabited loggers' camp. There were clothes hanging on a line and a campfire was burning. The camp had a black plastic roof and appeared to house a lot of people. The conditions were rudimentary: we could just see the roof placed on some logs. On the river close to the camp was a medium-sized canoe carrying barrels of fuel. Large quantities of planks were half-hidden about one hundred meters away from the camp.

On the way back, on the Auca route, no checkpoints were to be found to control the trucks loaded with timber.

These facts prove that illegal cedar logging is an unsolved problem within the Yasuni National Park, the Huaorani Territory and the Intangible Zone. Urgent action is required to put an end to this dangerous threat. The Intangible Zone's specially protected condition is known by all the actors (except by the free peoples living in voluntary isolation) and even so, nobody respects it. Nor is there any desire to enforce existing legislation. As the loggers say "say what they will in Quito, here all is still the same."

Urgent measures must be adopted, including checkpoints at the entry of the Yasuni National Park, timber control points, permanent monitoring of truck traffic, awareness and economic alternatives for the indigenous communities involved in the trafficking, negotiations and job opportunities to enable the loggers entering the YNP to leave it peacefully, follow-up on complaints made to the prosecutor's office against middle-men, thus leading to the heads of this mafia.

It is very important to reach agreements with the local populations so that they become the main actors involved in the conservation of the YNP and its resources.

Policies must be developed for the protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation in coordination with the indigenous peoples' organization CONAIE. The Intangible Zone must be declared indigenous territory of the IPVI, preserving its condition of intangibility perpetually and measures promoting contact must be prohibited.

Additionally, no more licences must be granted for the extraction of oil within the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve and the international community should support the proposal to keep crude oil underground in the ITT block, as suggested by the Ecuadorian Government.

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