Bolivia: The Amazon peoples discuss their future

A forum has been opened in Bolivia to discuss the issues and the vision of the Bolivian Amazon and to give back to the indigenous peoples the dignity stolen from them by the conquest of America.

Last June in the Amazon city of Guayaramerin, the Ministry of the Presidency of the Bolivian Republic organized the First Amazon Forum on “Macro-Regional Identity and Development.” One of the centres of the debate was local identity and the present situation of indigenous peoples that represent the country’s greatest ethnic-cultural diversity and in particular, the critical situation of the most vulnerable originating groups. Some of these are threatened by strong acculturation processes and the violation of their human rights, others are in danger of physical extinction and some live in voluntary isolation.

At the opening session, Evo Morales Ayma, the first President of Bolivia to be born within an originating indigenous community, stated before some three hundred participants – where a motley group of indigenous and peasant leaders from the whole of the Amazon stood out – that “To defend the Earth is to defend humanity. To save the environment is to save humanity.”

At a forum the previous day, indigenous peoples and peasant communities from the Amazon region had established the strategic outline for what they understand must be the Amazon development policy. Among its foundations, they affirmed that it “must be based on the special protection of indigenous peoples in a state of extreme vulnerability and particularly those who are at risk of disappearing, as they are the Amazon’s cultural, historic and ethnic heritage.”

These positions were expressed in a proposal, denouncing the attempts by transnational companies to pursue their avidity to privatize and monopolize the Amazon’s natural resources, presently allying themselves with the Departmental prefectures of Beni and Pando.

Furthermore, the proposal defends the right of the indigenous peoples to an autonomous and communal territory within the region, considered to be one of the most important biodiversity reserves in the world.

The proposal also rejects the Brazilian government’s intention of building mega dams on the Madera River, which would place at risk the environmental and social integrity of a large part of the Bolivian Amazon. The Brazilian government has just granted an environmental licence for dams at Jirau and Santo Antonio on the Madero River, going against the position of the Brazilian and Bolivian representatives of the Peasant Communities, Peoples and Organizations and other people affected by the dams, gathered in the “Social Movement in Defence of the Madero River Basin and the Amazon Region.” The Madero River Complex is a pilot project for a new management of the South American territory, that intends to establish a kind of parallel state, with its private sovereignty, its own rules, beyond the sovereignty of national laws.

On this occasion, the political minister, Juan Ramón Quintana, stressed the fact that “it must be the indigenous peoples that, together with the state negotiate sovereignty and territorial control in the

Amazon to end centuries of colonial exploitation and discrimination." According to the official, genocide and aggression towards the indigenous Amazon people has been a tool used to consolidate economic interests external to the region such as those that marked the rubber boom at the end of the nineteenth century. This continued through the second half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century with disregard for indigenous issues, projecting the power rationale of vernacular right-wing political "caciques" and their present demands for an isolating autonomy, counter to the demands of the indigenous movements.

"The Amazon must become a linking and integrating factor in a country as diverse as Bolivia and within the Amazon, indigenous peoples must act along the same lines to overcome feudal and racist stigmas that still survive in the region," stated Minister Quintana, who was responsible for reading out the "Guayaramerin Declaration" (available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Bolivia/Declaration_Guayaramerin.html), closing the first Amazon forum.

The following sentences are taken from this declaration, signed by all those present at the event: "from this forum is born an irreversible process that will help to heal the wounds of history, both those that bereaved our indigenous peoples and peasant communities, and those that degraded and ransacked our nature and our biodiversity." Further on it adds "from today on a new history starts, the history of Amazon dignity."

Article based on: "Primer Foro Amazónico en Bolivia defendió derechos de los pueblos indígenas más vulnerables de la región" (First Amazon Forum in Bolivia defended the rights of the region's most vulnerable indigenous peoples) Pablo Cingolani, e-mail: pablocingolani@yahoo.com.ar sent by the author; "¿Liderazgo sudamericano de Brasil? La aprobación de las represas del río Madera viola los principios para la convivencia pacífica de las naciones" (South American leadership of Brazil? The approval of the dams on the Madera River violates principles for peaceful and harmonious cohabitation of nations), FOBOMADE, Foro Boliviano sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo,(Bolivian Forum on Environment and Development) e-mail: comunicacion@fobomade.org.bo, http://www.fobomade.org.bo