
Mexico: Talking of trees

Bertolt Brecht wrote from exile: "Truly, I live in dark times./ The word ingénue is senseless. An unlined forehead / reveals insensitivity. He who laughs / has not yet heard the terrible news / it has not yet reached him. What times are these when a talk about trees is almost a crime because it implies silence on so many wrongs?"

It was 1938, but it could have been today. While peasants, indigenous peoples and other victims of so-called "progress" protest over their most elemental rights –to their land and their territories, to their seeds, to their resources, to sell their products on a public place– those at the top reply with unusual cynicism and violence, as if those demands were an insult. As if peasants and indigenous peoples were not part of the "public" in those public places. Characters who remind us of a hybrid between rich children and the Southern Cone dictators show themselves off in the mass media, affirming that it is the inhabitants that are exerting "violence" and not the thousands of armed forces they launch against them. Again, as in the time of Brecht, those who talk of peace mean war.

Today to speak of trees –or of flowers– is to name treachery, particularly when the forests and natural resources are coveted by the large timber, oil and mining companies and are located in the territories of indigenous peoples or of local communities that have been caring for them for decades or centuries.

On 29 April, dozens of Taromenane indigenous people of the Huaorani nation were murdered in their own territory in the Yasuni National Park in Ecuador by loggers who exploit their forests. According to the organization Acción Ecológica "intensive and violent forestry exploitation has been going on for years in the Yasuni National Park in full view and with the complicity of the police, environmental officers and the military. Trucks loaded with timber travel across river-ways and overland with impunity and even cross the military camp. Murders and deaths are repetitive. In 2003 dozens of Taromenanes were murdered. Since then nothing has been done to avoid this genocide either in a timely or relevant way." Until May this year, there had only been a response from the logging companies requesting "protection" against the aggression of the indigenous peoples and more incentives for their activities, which they call "sustainable," with the endorsement of the major environmental NGOs.

On 11 May, Juan Patricio Marileo, a Mapuche who is imprisoned in Chile for defending the right to his ancestral territory was taken from Angol prison to a hospital in critical condition following a hunger strike lasting 60 days, together with three other Mapuche fighters. They have been condemned to 10 years prison under the antiterrorist law, installed in the time of Pinochet, but successive governments have made use of it to lash out at indigenous peoples and peasants, to favour the invasion of logging and hydroelectric companies in their territories. Any show of solidarity with the Mapuche political prisoners has been brutally repressed. That same day 14 demonstrators, members of the Mapuche and Peasant Front for Struggle were arrested in Santiago .

Also on 11 May in Colombia, anti-riot police charged against indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and peasants pacifically protesting in Cali. They arrested eight people and injured many more. Their

crime: to protest against their appalling living conditions since they were displaced from their territories because of the construction of the Salvajina dam. The promises made to them were never kept. Now they are criminals because they are requesting that the agreements signed by the authorities should be honoured.

In Brazil, the 37 members of Via Campesina who pulled up plants from the tree nursery of the megapulp Aracruz company continue to be criminalized. For its part the company does not fear accusations for having destroyed with bulldozers two indigenous community villages a month ago, injuring many people. After all, Aracruz was only defending its plantations on ancestral indigenous territories and, for the authorities, this is not violence.

The forests of the entire continent are crying in silence because of such double-crossing. Because of this, the representatives of 26 Mexican indigenous peoples gathered on 5 and 6 May, changed this cry into a proud voice, declaring "From all the corners of the country our heart is beating, and from San Pedro Atlapulco in this Fourth National Indigenous Congress we condemn with all our energy and our rage, the repression, murder and imprisonment of our communities and peoples because of the pure and vile interest of taking our resources, despoiling our territories and converting us into salaried workers far from our communities to become ghosts with no future in the cities . San Salvador Atenco is a mirror. Its problems are our problems. They are also defending their land, they are also peasants, they are also defending their crops, they are also pledged to defend their lives and their rights, their reason and their destiny against the large companies that want to finish us off.

"But we are also strengthening our assemblies, our agrarian and traditional authorities, the struggle in defence of our maize landraces, in defence of our forests and water, the struggle against certification of our lands and environmental services, exercising an increasingly autonomous education. We do this while we struggle against the mining companies, the logging companies, the land monopolizing companies, against the major companies cornering food, such as the Wal-Mart chain, against privatization of our water, against State laws that want to legitimize the 2001 counter-reform."

The map of devastation is wide and belongs to others. But flowers continue to break up the asphalt.

By Silvia Ribeiro, ETC Group, published in "La Jornada" Mexico, 13 May 2006.