
Argentina-Chile: Young Mapuche opposed to the advance of plantation companies seeks political asylum

On 6 December, 23-year-old Pascual Pichun Collanao, a member of the Antonio Nírripil community from the Temulemu sector in the southern Chilean commune of Traiguen, formally requested political asylum in Argentina. The young man had been on the run since November 2003 when, with his brother Rafael they decided not to give themselves up to justice after being refused the right to freedom under surveillance because they were unable to pay a court fine. The brothers had been given a 5-year jail sentence for setting fire to a truck belonging to Forestal Minico in March 2002. Presently Rafael is serving a sentence in Traiguen prison following his arrest in July 2005.

“We are Mapuche, children of the earth and for this reason we have always defended it. Since 1998 our community has strongly defended our ancestral territory against the advance of plantation forestry companies and we have denounced the serious damage caused by industrial plantations, using all public fora to express our unrest.” These are the words of the lonko (traditional community authority) Pascual Pichún Paillalao and his son Rafael in a letter sent to the Secretariat of the Committee for Eligibility to the Status of Refugees in Buenos Aires, supporting the petition made by the young Pascual. “This has caused an unending campaign of legal and political persecution against our family and against other members of our community which comprises some 80 peasant families of humble origin.”

In April 2004, the lonko Pichun Paillalao, father of the asylum-seeker, was given a 5-year jail sentence for the crime of “terrorist threats” together with his peer, Aniceto Norin, the lonko of the neighbouring community of Didaico.

“Our struggle is the struggle of a people for its rights, it is the struggle of a community for the good of its members, for the defence of our culture and our language, for the traditional medicine that lives in our forests and for water that is scarcer now than ever before” explain lonko Pichún Paillalao and his son. “If this is an act of ‘terrorism’ so be it, but we have the conviction that it is a legitimate struggle and that in no case do we represent a ‘danger to society’ as the Chilean Government and tribunals have stated. It is for this reason that we have been irregularly sentenced, in shamefully racist court cases.”

According to Juan Pichún Collanao, spokesperson for the Antonio Nírripil community, “Monoculture pine and eucalyptus plantations cause ponds and streams to dry up making it hard for people to live there. We also have airborne contamination from spraying (from the air) with chemical products to achieve quicker production and spraying from the ground to leave just the pine trees. This goes to the streams or wells where most of the Mapuche families obtain their drinking water and causes biological problems. There are children who are born with six fingers, children who get ill when they are very young, who have died without the cause being known.”

Around 1997 Mapuche community members started a series of ‘productive recoveries’ that is, occupation of large tree plantations, felling them and growing crops. In this way they fulfilled the double objective of satisfying their territorial demands and curbing monoculture tree plantations. State

response was an escalating process criminalizing mobilizations with the application of the laws for Interior State Security No. 12.927 and Antiterrorism Nº18.314, inherited from the dictatorship.

According to Juan Pichún Collonao, the fire for which the brothers Pascual and Rafael were sentenced was staged by people who work in the Nancahue estate controlled by Juan Agustín Figueroa, a man with a strong political background – he was minister of agriculture during the presidency of Patricio Aylwin (1990- 94) and member of the Constitutional Tribunal until very recently – whom the Mapuche consider to be a new Inquisitor.

Criminalization of the Mapuche demands in Chile has been denounced in international spheres for almost a decade now. Various international organizations have recommended to the Chilean authorities that they should introduce changes in their policies regarding these people. Presently a dozen Mapuche leaders are in Chilean prisons serving sentences that vary from 5 to 10 years, while a similar number have gone underground. State repression also was responsible for the death of 17-year-old Alex Lemun, murdered by the Special Police Forces in November 2003 during eviction from an estate.

In 1974, shortly after the imposition of General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile (1973-90), decree 701 was promulgated for the promotion of the plantation forestry industry. This involved subsidizing almost all the costs of companies investing in the sector. This regulation and the counter agrarian reform carried out by the military government put an end to indigenous community property and shattered the policy of the socialist government of Salvador Allende (1970-73) of access to land in Chile.

“Following that decade — affirms Lorena Ojeda, of the Temuco Association of Young Professional Mapuche Konapuewman — the companies continued to expand, covering many hectares of territory. This led to the Mapuche communities being fenced in by the forestry companies, causing mass migration of rural people to the city, with the loss of identity that this implies.” As a paradigmatic point, it should be noted that the temu -the tree predominating in the Antonio Nirripil community and closely linked to their spiritual life- has almost disappeared as a result of the advance of monoculture tree plantations.

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For more information: Comisión por el Refugio Político en Argentina a Pascual Pichun Collonao – COPP, libertad_pascualpichun@yahoo.com.ar; Model letter to send to CEPARE in support of Pascual Pichún Collonao's request for political asylum www.argentina.indymedia.org/news/2006/01/368597.php; the web pages: www.nodo50.org/azkintuwe, www.argentina.indymedia.org/features/pueblos may also be visited.