
Colombia: A forestry law for the foreign capital business

Of the 3,500 million hectares of forests existing in the world, close on 63 million are to be found in Colombia and half of these are located in territories enriched by the cultures of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendent communities. These forests are also host to the richest forms of biological diversity in the world and support the numerous cultures that inhabit them. They are also the location for climatic and water regulation and the habitat of complex and irreplaceable life forms.

However, in what is an unfortunate common feature of numerous countries in the South, the forest-culture relationship and the living conditions of numerous communities have been dramatically affected by the implementation of productive forest chains promoted by USAID through the Colombia Forestry Programme. Other factors have also had an impact: the Colombian State's interest in converting biodiversity and the rest of the indigenous people and Afro-descendent communities' environmental heritage into merchandise at the service of international capital and particularly that of the United States in the FTA; the implementation of highway and port facilities, mining and bioprospecting mega-projects; the establishment of large-scale oil palm plantations on indigenous and Afro-descendent community territories and vital spaces.

The Forestry Law Bill that is presently being debated in Congress falls within the framework of these policies. It has already been adopted by the Senate and is going through a last debate in the Chamber of Representatives Plenary.

Several Colombian social organizations have stated their criticism of this Bill, basically regarding the fact that it does not achieve the purpose of putting order in the chaos presently existing in the country regarding the harnessing of forest resources, but on the contrary, it is likely to generate further legal chaos leading to non-application both of existing laws on this subject and of new ones.

In the first place, they claim that, regarding the formulation of the Bill, no participation has been given or consultation made with the Afro-descendent, Indigenous and Mestizo communities, or for that matter with any other social actors involved.

Furthermore, the Forestry Law Bill states that it will regulate tree and forest plantations, but the social organizations declare that "Its contents are primarily to promote timber production in the country through plantations, discarding the possibility of a law for natural forests. This is a policy that lacks a comprehensive environmental perspective, and does not consider forests as an ecosystem as established by the Biodiversity Convention because it modifies the sector's policy planning and formulation bodies and radically changes the corresponding institutions to the extent that most of the control will lie exclusively in the hands of the Ministry of Agriculture and private agents."

They also accuse the Bill of facilitating access by international companies to forestry business by establishing legal figures that enable access to the native forests of the main Pacific and Amazon areas, affecting Indigenous shelters, collective territories of Afro-descendent communities and peasant settlements.

The organizations point out that “the marked eagerness in the discussion process and rapid adoption of the Bill in Congress do not agree with the enormous impact that it will have on the country’s forest wealth and on the rights of many Colombians. On the contrary, the influence of foreign bodies and logging companies interested in the promotion and adoption of the project is well-known.” “The prompt adoption of this Bill on the eve of the signature of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States promoting the environmental services market, makes the catastrophic results we are warning about even more expeditious.”

The support of numerous individuals and organizations has endorsed the public letter setting out the above arguments. It can be accessed at:

http://www.censat.org/Biodiversidad_Bosques_PL_Forestal.htm. Those wishing to give their support to the letter should contact the CENSTAT organization at the following e-mail address: bosques@censat.org.

Article based on information from CENSAT: “Declaración sobre el proyecto de Ley Forestal”, “Carta abierta al Congreso de la República”,
http://www.censat.org/Biodiversidad_Bosques_PL_Forestal.htm