Venezuela: Will Chavez intervene in the communities' dispute over Smurfit plantations?

Exactly six years ago we had the opportunity to visit the State of Portuguesa in Venezuela to obtain first hand information on the situation of the local populations in Morador and Tierra Buena regarding the Smurfit Carton de Venezuela's vast eucalyptus, pine and gmelina (Gmelina arborea) plantations. This company belongs to the transnational company Smurfit Corporation of Irland.

During this visit we were able to document the social and environmental impacts resulting from this company's activities and its plantations, summarized in an article published in the January-February 1999 edition of the Revista del Sur (see complete article in: http://www.redtercermundo.org.uy/revista_del_sur/texto_completo.php?id=859)

When President Hugo Chavez took up office, we thought that the situation of these communities might improve. With that hope in mind we sent a letter to the President on 26 March 1999, emphasizing that "in order to find a solution it seems fundamental to address the peasants' aspiration to receive the land of the Finca la Productora, which we believe to be pursuant to the advanced Venezuelan agrarian law, and at the same time to cease the aggression towards the environment resulting from the activities of this company."

That same year a new constitution was adopted in Venezuela, generating new expectations regarding a possible solution to the conflict in Portuguesa. In fact, the new Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in its Article 306, stipulates that "The State shall promote the conditions for comprehensive rural development with the aim of generating employment and guaranteeing an appropriate level of welfare to the peasant population, together with their incorporation into national development. Equally it shall promote agricultural activities and best land use practices by providing infrastructure works, inputs, credit, training services and technical assistance."

Equally, the new Land and Agrarian Development Law establishes in its Article 8 that the peasant sector will be guaranteed incorporation into the productive process and for this purpose, the structuring of farms through acquisition of lands is promoted. In Article 12 it recognizes the right to assign land to any person who is competent to carry out agricultural work. Furthermore, the government has stated that the country's food security is a priority, and therefore, agricultural lands are too.

From the above it seems clear that legal provisions endorse the communities' claims in their dispute with Smurfit. Furthermore, the company itself seems to have finally understood that it needs to reach some type of agreement with the local people. As we mentioned in the Revista del Sur in 1999: "In spite of its policy of harassment and repression, the company does not seem to be successful in overcoming the determination of the people opposing their activities…"

In fact, in a recent report produced by the Venezuelan organization AMIGRANSA regarding the situation in the zone affected by Smurfit plantations (see complete report in

http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Venezuela/disputa.html) it states that the company is willing to sell (out of its 27,000 hectares in the State) the “Finca La Productora” (2,000 hectares) to solve the conflict that has arisen.

In this context, the peasants of Morador and Tierra Buena have concluded that they cannot carry out the delicate negotiations with the Smurfit Company on their own, and need a high level and experienced Government negotiator to help them reach an agreement with Smurfit. The peasants do not agree on the purchase being made until the following has been clearly defined: 1) How many hectares of land at the Finca La Productora are private and how many belong to the National Agrarian Institute (presently the National Land Institute) and therefore are the property of the Venezuelan State? 2) What environmental and social liabilities have Smurfit’s activities given rise to in the zone? (The peasants believe that such liabilities must be deducted from the price Smurfit wants for the estate).

In support of the local communities’ claims, WRM sent a letter to President Chavez on 18 November (see letter at http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Venezuela/carta181104.html). This letter ends by saying “The peasants in the zone need the support of your government, Mr. President, to carry out negotiations with this powerful company and it is for this reason that we approach you to ask you for this support.”

In turn, the Latin American Network Against Monoculture Tree Plantations (RECOMA) also joined this appeal by sending a letter to President Chavez dated 30 November, setting out that: "Faced by such a difficult and unjust situation, we address you, asking you to adopt the pertinent measures to solve this problem affecting society and the environment in the State of Portuguesa. (See the complete letter in http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Venezuela/Recoma.html).

We hope that the appeal of the local communities will be addressed and that finally justice will prevail, because, as we wrote in 1999: “If tree plantations are unsustainable in general, in this case they seem to be more unsustainable than ever.”

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:
http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Venezuela/Smurfit.html