Venezuela: Government plan endangers the Imataca forest

The Imataca Forest Reserve's native forest, located in the extreme east of the country, of imposing scenic beauty and rich biological diversity, fulfils a fundamental role in soil and water protection – of the rivers Yuruan, Cuyuni, Orinoco, Brazo Imataca, Rio Grande, Botanamo, Barima, Orocaima – and is a cultural and sacred reserve for the Indigenous Peoples.

Imataca covers an area of 38,219 square kilometres, of which over three million hectares, that is to say 80% of its surface, are rainforests. Six out of each ten square metres of the territory are legally under some kind of environmental protection, but will now be affected by the Bill on the Imataca Land Planning and Use Regulation, prepared by the Ministry of the Environment.

According to the authorities, this plan limits mining activities up to (a maximum of) 11% of the area, against 38% foreseen in the previous 1997 decree. However, its critics argue that it is a frontal legalization of mining, authorizing prospecting, exploration, exploitation, processing, transformation and transportation of metallic and non-metallic minerals in a zone that – due to its extreme ecological fragility and low regeneration capacity – once intervened will be placed in the category of "forests in danger of disappearing." Alexander Luzardo of the College of Sociologists, considers that this new regulation will affect the "right of Venezuelan society to preserve its forests in pristine conditions perpetually," with a higher value to future generations than the immediate economic benefit.

The Final Report for Land Planning of the Imataca Forest Reserve, carried out by the Institute of Tropical Zoology of the Central University of Venezuela and the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, recognized in December 2002 that "forestry and mining produce impacts on soils, water, the micro-climate, vegetation, fauna, human communities and biological diversity in general."

Furthermore, the water-forest relationship is indivisible and the deforestation inevitably accompanying mining, interrupts protection of water and its continuous flow. This protection is vital for the future of life on the planet.

The ecologist organization Amigransa is demanding President Chavez to enforce the commitments taken on during his electoral campaign, when he publicly stated that if to remove gold, the forests had to be done away with, then they would keep the forests. This organization submits the following points:

1) Ratification of the Global Vision of the Bill for Land Planning and Regulation of Use of the Imataca Forest Reserve

2) To propose that the Ministry of the Environment should designate a considerable area of the Imataca Forests as Imataca National Park.

3) To request that mining use should be excluded from the Plan for Land Planning and Regulation of Use of the Imataca Forest Reserve.

4) To request that Imataca should be free of mining centres and that areas that have been degraded by mining should be rehabilitated. Mining concessions and/or contracts should be rescinded and the granting of new concessions and mining infrastructure in Imataca should be prohibited.

5) To request a moratorium on forestry exploitation in Imataca.

6) To exhort the Ministry of the Environment to promote with time, a broad national discussion, with real interactive participation.

7) To exhort the government to conclude the Demarcation of the Habitat and Land of the Indigenous Peoples, prior to any land planning and allocation of uses in Imataca.

Amigransa states that the sustainable development of the country must be seen as an overall issue and not as a harnessing of isolated resources, asking: “do we need to destroy the Imataca forests in order to survive?” “Would it not be better to leave this extractive profit-making policy behind once and for all, as with this Plan Imataca would be subject to savage mining and forestry exploitation? The handing over of this Territory covering nearly 4 million hectares to national and transnational logging and mining companies, warrants a broader national discussion, active and protagonist participation, much analysis regarding the kind of development we want, how we want it and where we want it.”

Article based on information from “La reserva forestal de Imataca. Un bosque insustituible en peligro de desaparecer,” declaration by the Sociedad de Amigos en Defensa de la Gran Sabana-AMIGRANSA, 16 October 2003, sent by Amigransa, e-mail: amigransa@cantv.net ; “Abrirán reserva a explotación minera”, Humberto Márquez, IPS, published in Tierra América, http://www.tierramerica.net/2003/1018/acentos.shtml