
Colombia: Oil palm plantation project threatens biodiversity in the Choco

The Choco region (an area of 75,000 km² on the Colombian Pacific coast) is a strategic ecosystem due to its natural and cultural diversity and shows the greatest concentration of biodiversity in the world as regards the number of species per hectare (see WRM Bulletin 44). Of the original area of heterogeneous forests, only 44% are still standing, mainly because of colonisation, expansion of the agricultural frontier, cattle-raising and commercial logging.

The Lower Atrato, in the basin of the River Atrato, which is part of this bio-geographical region, is in a state of alert. The People's Defence Office, in the document "Timber exploitation and Human Rights, Lower Atrato-Choco" (Explotación Maderera y Derechos Humanos Bajo Atrato-Chocó), expresses the profound concern of the members of the community councils of the Lower Atrato (Cacarica, Jiguamiando and de Curvarado, among others), over an oil palm plantation project, to be implemented in the Riosucio Municipality.

This project is to be undertaken by the Urapalma S.A. Company which is not a member of the concerted agreement on cleaner production, signed by the Fedepalma Federation, the Ministries of the Environment and Agriculture and various environmental companies.

The objective of the project is to plant 20 thousand hectares of palm trees (the Ekona and Ekona X lame varieties) in the Departments of Choco and Antioquia. The first block will be 9 thousand hectares, 6,500 belonging to Urapalma and 2,500 belonging to Asopalma (this latter company promoted by the former, in which peasants from the region are associated, and have been assigned a 5 hectare plot each.

A subsequent stage foresees the installation of an oil extraction plant in the zone for the production of 35,500 tons of raw palm oil in five years. Presently, they are in the process of setting up associations of inhabitants in the zone in Paravandocito and Munguido to sow 380 hectares. This initiative has been supported by various different bodies, such as the Ministries of Agriculture and Development, the Agrarian Bank (which allocated a loan of up to 80% of the direct costs of the operation during the unproductive stage), FINAGRO, the Investment for Peace Fund (which provides resources to the Rural Capitalisation Incentive aimed at the cultivation of oil palm) and the Government of Antioquia.

There has been no consultation process with the ethnic communities, no formalities regarding environmental viability have been undertaken, no permits for water concession or forest use have been requested from the environmental authorities having jurisdiction in the Departments of Codechoco and Corpouraba, thus ignoring the environmental and ethnic regulations applying to this zone.

Para-military groups acting in the region have served the purposes of the project, for which collective community landholding of the territories in the zone is an obstacle. In this respect, the assault against the guerrilla not only obeys a military strategy, but also an economic one for the private sector. The Inter-church Justice and Peace Commission has denounced that it is evident that no state intervention is taking place to structurally face concealed armed action through para-military forces,

while the community rights of Afro-descendants are ignored and the illegal sowing of oil palm continues to enjoy armed protection.

As in so many other places in tropical regions, natural and cultural diversity is running the risk of disappearing to be substituted by large-scale monoculture tree plantations that only serve company interests, aimed at production and marketing of palm oil. And just like so many other cases, resistance to companies appropriating land is growing increasingly strong.

Article based on information from: "Alerta por Palmicultura en el Bajo Atrato", sent by Gonzalo Díaz Cañadas, Fundación Beteguma, Founder of the Citará newspaper, www.citara.ipfox.com , e-mail: periodicocitara@hotmail.com ; "Graves violaciones de derechos humanos en Jiguamiandó y Curbaradó [Chocó]", by Justicia y Paz , December 23, 2002, <http://colombia.indymedia.org/news/2002/12/854.php>