The oil wars

In spite of what its title might suggest, this editorial is not about the war declared by the government of the United States against the people of Irak; it's about the never ending war declared by oil interests against the planet and its peoples.

Many wars have been carried out and are still being waged throughout the world to ensure corporate control over oil. Oil is power and power needs to control oil. Behind the names of presidents and dictators are the names of much more powerful actors: Exxon/Mobil, Chevron/Texaco, Shell, British Petroleum, Elf. These --and their close relatives-- are the ones that throw out elected presidents and dictators to replace them with more friendly dictators or presidents.

Many of those wars are rarely reported in the media and when they are, oil is seldom mentioned as being their root cause. A government is toppled by armed opposition in an African country and the story only covers the hatred between both sides and almost never the corporations and foreign governments backing each of the two sides. In many cases, the actors behind the scenario are oil companies. In Venezuela, an elected president has had to face a coup and a general strike because he is sitting on top of a sea of oil and is not perceived as being sufficiently friendly to the US oil establishment.

But oil is not only behind civil wars, coups d'etat and presidential election campaigns. Oil is also responsible for countless "low-intensity" wars, that destroy entire communities throughout the world and particularly in the tropics. Many indigenous and other local communities have been wiped out from the map or have had to face enormous hardship due to the environmental destruction resulting from oil exploration and exploitation in their territories, as well as from the widespread violation of their human rights. From Ecuador to Nigeria and from Indonesia to Chad, the "black gold" has been a curse to local peoples and to their environments.

Needless to say that oil is also waging a war against the Planet's air and climate. Widespread air pollution is affecting all living creatures, while climate change is putting a question mark on the Earth's future. Use of fossil fuels --and particularly oil-- is clearly responsible for this state of things.

Governments of the world have made some attempts at addressing this latter issue. They signed and ratified the Convention on Climate Change and its related Kyoto Protocol. Similarly to what happened recently in the United Nations Security Council in relation to Irak, one government --representing the interests of oil corporations-- decided not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol because it would affect its interests. This one country --the United States-- happens to be the number one in CO_2 emissions in the world and the home of the most powerful oil corporations in the world. It is thus responsible for most of the past and present oil wars --and not only this one.

In the current situation, it is clear that the United Nations system is imperfect. Forest, biodiversity and climate campaigners feel at times very frustrated by the UN's lack of action on those issues. But, however imperfect, it is equally clear that it is much more democratic than unilateral decisions taken by the powerful responding to corporate interests.

Wars --with or without an ideological component-- are always terrible. Oil wars --always about money and power-- are even worse.