Mexico: Stop the Forced Displacement of Indigenous Communities in Chiapas

An emergency delegation sponsored by Global Exchange has returned from the Montes Azules Integral Biosphere Reserve in Chiapas, Mexico, and has prepared the following statement:

We denounce the imminent forced relocation of indigenous communities settled in Montes Azules. Further, we concur with most nongovernmental organizations that the dislocations are being carried out as a pretext for further commercial exploitation of the region, such as oil exploration, bioprospecting, and the construction of hydroelectric dams.

Under threat in Montes Azules are communities allied with the Rural Association of Collective Interests (ARIC-Independiente) and EZLN support base communities. The EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) has been involved in ongoing resistance since January 1, 1994, the first day NAFTA took effect.

On March 12-13, we met with representatives of the communities of Nuevo San Gregorio, Nueva Israel, and Rancheria Corozal, part of a six-village region that is allied with ARIC-Independiente and listened to their testimony. We also visited with representatives of various nongovernmental organizations in Chiapas during our week-long visit.

We denounce the Mexican government's plans to displace indigenous peoples from this area and the charges that the indigenous peoples are destroyers of the land. Many of them have been subjected to severe harassment by various government authorities, including the federal environmental prosecutor (PROFEPA) and the Federal Preventative Police (PFP). These authorities claim that indigenous settlers are threatening the integrity of the UN-recognized Biosphere Reserve.

In flights over the region, we were able to verify that any ecological damage done by these communities is minimal, especially in comparison to the extensive damage resulting from roads, cattle ranches, logging, military bases and other commercial uses of the land.

Indigenous people have the right to remain on their land and to farm their land in the ways that they see fit. They have an ethical claim to live on their land and work it in ways that support the earth. In addition, their presence on the land is legitimate under the provisions of the indigenous rights convention (Convention 169) of the UN International Labor Organization. We reject the view of some international environmental NGOs (e.g., Conservation International) that have supported the Mexican government's charge that indigenous communities are destroying the rainforest.

The current crisis in Chiapas is an outcome of the long history of unresolved land conflicts in southern Mexico and Chiapas. Many of the current settlers' parents and grandparents moved to Montes Azules, at the behest of previous governments, to escape the oppressive and degrading working conditions that are present on southern Mexico´s large landed estates. They are of Tzotzil, Tseltal, Tojolobal and Chol ancestry, representing the cultural diversity of the traditional Mayan peoples of Chiapas.

The communities we visited are cooperating in an important experiment to demonstrate a more sustainable way of living on the land. For eight or more years they have ceased using slash and burn agriculture and have ended the use of harmful chemicals. They seek international support to continue developing new organic methods of cultivation based on some of the most traditional means of caring for the land.

We visited refugees from one community, Arroyo San Pablo, who were forced out of the rainforest last December and relocated to a government-run shelter in the city of Comitan. For three months they have been languishing in dismal conditions, dispirited by the government´s apparent inability --or unwillingness-- to resolve their situation.

We reject the idea that the forced relocation of indigenous peoples has anything to do with protecting the ecosystem in question, and believe that it is paving the way for Plan Puebla Panama and the Free Trade Area of the Americas. We believe in the self-determination of the indigenous peoples, as outlined in the San Andres Accords of 1996 and that the protection of the biodiversity of Montes Azules will best be implemented by the indigenous peoples themselves.

The Global Exchange emergency delegation included 12 representatives from the United States, Canada, Italy, and Mexico. Organizations represented were ACERCA (Action for Community and Ecology in the Regions of Central America), Social Justice Committee, Social Action Committee, Institute for Social Ecology, and the Chiapas Independent Media Project. The delegation was accompanied by independent journalists from the United States.

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