Ecuador: Clashes between indigenous group and loggers in the Amazon

Tragic events have recently taken place at the mouth of the Babataro river in Tiguino, the thick Amazon Pastaza basin, resulting in the death of an indigenous inhabitant and of three loggers. According to Luis Awa, former president of the Ecuadorian Amazon Huaorani Nacionality Organisation, the problem started with the coming of loggers to the Tagaeris territory. Awa stated that the permanent noise of chainsaws felling the forest annoyed the indigenous people, who have no contact with mestizo society. For this reason, they finally attacked the loggers, who repelled the attack with firearms. As a consequence of this clash, one of the members of the Tagae family was killed. Subsequently, the loggers took up their work again.

A few days later, the loggers were attacked and killed by the Tagaeris' lethal and heavy chonta lances. Awa stated that the event came to a tragic end due to "the lack of respect towards these people" shown by the loggers. Awa also said that at a meeting his father had had with the Tagaeris, these told him of their concern over the constant presence of loggers in the zone and the excessive noise in their forest habitat. "We told the loggers that they could come across the Tagaeris and have problems; unfortunately, they didn't take notice," said Awa.

Later it was known that the loggers came in by way of Auca, from Coca. They continued down river by canoe or raft to the mouth of the Babataro river, where they log the timber. This route is part of the route to the Yasuni National Park and crosses the Tagaeris' sanctuary. The civilian and military authorities had been informed of the invasion of prohibited zones by the loggers and oil companies. These zones are inhabited by the inheritors of Tagae, a leader who was killed by oil workers in Tiputini en 1981. They are called Tagaeris (which means red feet) because they paint their feet that colour.

The Minister of the Environment, Lourdes Luque, said that her State Secretariat was working with indigenous leaders in a system of territorial management. Commenting on these events, she considered that the Tagaeris "are tremendously jealous of their territoriality and are very radical. It was very imprudent to intervene in zones belonging to them." Carlos Borja y Borja, defender of the Pastaza people stated that six cultures live in Pastaza, among them the Huaoranis. The Tagaeris ethnologically belong to these people. According to the ancestral customs and laws of this culture, anyone violating their territory, which is their home and who does not respect their autochthonous practices, is sanctioned – sometimes with death.

This type of confrontation --and death on both sides-- must and can be avoided. To achieve this it is essential to establish a relationship of respect among the different cultures and the legal and practical recognition of the territorial rights of the indigenous peoples living in the forests. In the specific case of the Amazon, it should be understood that most of the peoples already lived in the region long before the present national states were created. What is more, many of them only learnt during the second half of the twentieth century that they were considered to be Ecuadorians or Brazilians or Peruvians, by countries whose very existence they had no knowledge of. It is the task of the peoples of these and other Amazon countries to find an equitable solution to a problem that should not be "solved" --as in so many other cases-- by the law of the strongest at the expense of the rights of the

weakest. In this case, despite their violent reaction, the Tagaeris are undoubtedly the weakest.