Guatemala: Opposition to highway project threatening forest area

In Guatemala deforestation processes are in rapid acceleration; every year around 90,000 hectares of forests are lost and less than twenty percent of the original forest cover is left. The Department of El Quiché in the west of the country, has been one of those most affected by deforestation. However, to the north, in the municipalities of Chajul, Uspantan and Chicaman, a major remnant of relatively well conserved cloud forest is to be found.

The 45,000 hectares of municipal forests in Chajul were designated as a protected area in 1997 with the name and category of Ixil Visis Caba Biosphere Reserve. The other forested area, covering almost 20,000 hectares is just next to Visis, between the municipalities of Chicaman and Uspantan and is rated as a tropical rainforest area, known as the mountains of La May or El Amay. As from 1992, the municipality of Chicaman launched a process for the legal protection of these mountains and it was that year that a municipal agreement was issued, declaring them National Park. In spite of this, the legal requisites were not completed and therefore the area was not recognised within the Guatemalan system of Protected Areas (SIGAP).

Chicaman shows a high rate of deforestation --almost 402 hectares per year-- placing at serious risk the integrity of these forests. However the main threat is a project submitted by the Uspantan Municipality, involving the construction of a 24 km highway from the village of Lajchimel to the village of Lancetillo, that would divide the “La May” mountain system in two. The project has an important antecedent. Last year the same initiative was submitted to the Ministry of the Environment, through an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). It was not approved, under the consideration that the negative impacts on the environment were greater than the positive ones. In spite of this, the Uspantan Municipality insists on carrying out the project and submitted a new Environmental Impact Assessment in April this year. The Assessment is a scantly technical, contradictory and deficient document, with many gaps in subjects that should be included, and a modified replicate of the previously submitted document.

According to Guatemalan legislation, following submission of an EIA, 20 working days are given to receive comments and observations. The Chicaman Municipal Corporation, interested in protecting the area, submitted a memorandum opposing the project, as it violates the Chicaman territory and will cause inevitable destruction of the forest. Furthermore, they add that a highway bordering the mountain already exists and communicates the same place where the new one is planned to be built. We have been following this case from the NGO Madre Selva, accompanying the Chicaman Municipality in the process of declaring a reserve and of opposition to the highway project, as we consider that the damage to the ecosystems will be irreversible and that with it, a significant sample, of great importance to the natural Guatemala heritage, will be lost.

Presently the Ministry of the Environment has already received the observations from the Chicaman Municipality and Madre Selva, together with a file containing 5,000 signatures from the neighbours of Uspantan, who oppose the project. The company carrying out the assessment has been given a further 20 days to make changes in it. During this time we have been communicating with the people at the ministry to find out the drift and decision taken on the case. If it were to be approved, we will be

implementing legal action to contest the process.

Letters opposing the highway and in support of the declaration of the La May mountains as a protected area can be sent to: Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 10a. Calle 6-81 zona 1, edificio 7 & 10 4to piso, Oficina de Gestión Ambiental Fax. 220-44-77, with copy to: Colectivo MadreSelva al e-mail: Mselva@intelnet.net.gt