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## Ecuador: When people said NO to mining

Mining is one of the direct causes of deforestation. In spite of that, not only has this industry continued with its activities, but in the last years it has also managed to introduce changes in national and international legislation and policies, which favour the consortiums of the sector. This has been done to the detriment of the legislation that protects indigenous peoples and the environment.

Furthermore, the powerful interests of the mining industry are not lonely players. They count on the pressure of multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which, within the framework of the so-called “development” projects, impose structural adjustment programmes that force governments to free the flow of capital in order to facilitate mining expansion.

In Ecuador, however, the people of a small village have stood up for their rights. In the south of the Ecuadorian Amazon, in the Yanzatza canton, province of Zamora Chinchipe, at the confluence of the rivers Zamora and Nangaritza, is located Los Encuentros, capital of a parish of the same name. Its dwellers, pushed by forest destruction, migrated from other systems in search of better lands.

Recently arrived to the region, they did not know the local ecosystem, and consequently they acted inadequately. Now they are suffering the consequences of their bad management, but they have also reflected in order to take the necessary steps to correct the situation, and prevent their children from repeating their fate and being forced to migrate.

But at the same time that they have increased their environmental awareness and began to make plans and decisions about the environmental future of their area, the Minister of Energy and Mines granted a concession for alluvial mining of 2,500 hectares on the banks of the rivers Zamora and Nangaritza. Riverside communities, to whom the river is a vital element for their livelihood --source of food, water supply both for daily use and irrigation of their food-crops-- know that mining will inevitably mean pollution, and that this threatens their food sovereignty.

The local people of Los Encuentros, acting by decision of well attended Parish Meetings, decided to take the matter to court. There they expressed their claims and proved that the concessionaire had violated several constitutional rules by not carrying out the previous consultation with the community and not submitting the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and the Environmental Management Plan in due time for their discussion.

The authorities considered their request. The Under Secretary of Energy and Mines asked them for a month term so that the EIA could be submitted and discussed by the assembly, and accepted to abide by their decision. They received the voluminous document only two days before the limit date; however, they maintained their decision of rejecting the mining concession, in order to ensure a worthy future for their children. Even though this decision was accepted by the National Director of Mines who attended the meeting, and registered in a formal record, whereby a month term was granted to the firm to abandon the region, fifteen days later, the leaders who had signed the record were notified of an administrative appeal filed by the concessionaire and accepted by the relevant

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authority. The notification also stated that local leaders would have to appear in court for an administrative and technical inspection, accusing them of terrorism and vandalism.

Armed with patience, local villagers massively attended the inspection and demanded that many evident insecure elements were registered in the report, as well as the lack of environmental policies in the mining camp, where solid and liquid wastes were directly dumped into the river. Once again they waited for the date established for the company to leave the place, but, a few days later, instead of leaving, the concessionaire began to work with military support. The villagers of Los Encuentros said: this is enough. They went to the bank of the river Zamora with their tools (shovels, pickaxes, machetes) and cut the trees that supported a barge built for camp and mining exploitation, forcing the concessionaire to stop the works. They gave the company 12 hours to leave the place. The police and the military tried to repress villagers, but they were far too many. Finally the company abandoned the area on December 18, 2001.

For the people of Los Encuentros, that day has become part of their best history, because they bravely defended their right to live in a healthy environment. They expelled a polluting activity they did not want, betting on other that do not degrade the environment. They knew that their true wealth lies in biological and cultural wealth. ¿Does the government know this?

Article based on information compiled by Yolanda Reyes, Fundación Vientos de Vida,