Colombia: Logging and violence against Afro-Colombian communities in the Chocó

On 27 December 2001, the Colombian Inter-Congregational Justice and Peace Commission sent the President of the Republic, Doctor Andrés Pastrana Arango and other national authorities a letter in which, among many other things, it reported that during the first twenty days of December, the "Maderas del Darién" company had been logging in a place known as Mendoza, in the perimeter of San Jose de La Balsa, La Balsa, Bocachica, San Higinio, within the Collective Territory of Cacarica. The limits of the Cacarica basin border the Los Katios National Park which hosts one of the highest levels of biodiversity per square kilometre in the world.

For some time now, the Afro-Colombian Communities, Forcibly Displaced from the Cacarica Basin in Chocó, provisionally settled in Turbo, Bocas del Atrato and Bahia Cupica, have been reporting illegal and indiscriminate deforestation of their territories by the YIREH company. Apparently it is operating in connection with the logging company "Maderas del Darién" (WRM Bulletin 28, November 1999).

This forestry exploitation they are complaining about implies a disregard for the Afro-Colombian communities' rights, set out in Law 70, officially recognising their territories. The artificial channels opened up by the logging company have further exposed the communities to the para-military forces by making access and fast offensive and monitoring movements possible from military locations.

It is also stated that the inhabitants of the Riosucio municipality have witnessed and confirmed the installation of armed bases in Cacarica as part of a new stage of the military strategy involving the co-option of the Afro-Colombian and Mestizo population and their participation in economic proposals such as the production of coca and oil palm.

After 3 years of complaints about the illegal logging done by the Maderas del Darién company, the Cacarica families continue witnessing the large machines extracting their forest resources, and only find justification and omission on the part of national environmental authorities and monitoring bodies and complicity on the part of the territorial bodies for environmental management such as Codechocó.

Territorial defence has implied not only hostility against the returned families, but the community itself has also been accused of deforestation and the responsibility of the logging company has been ignored. The appointment of the Higher Council Board, elected in accordance with procedure foreseen in Law 70 has been omitted and the appointment of other Boards that do not have the backing of the returned communities has been endorsed. This action has opened the way for all types of advantages to be taken.

With this demand for justice and moral amendment, the letter states that neither the Trusteeship actions, nor the interviews with the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of the Environment have succeeded in obtaining endorsement for the freezing of land purchase and sale to avoid private interests, associated with major capital, being put before collective and community interests.