
Mexico: Finnish environmentalists concerned by Finnish forestry plan

Digna Ochoa, the lawyer defending Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera recently liberated (see article in this section), untiring defender of peasant rights, has been murdered. At 37, she had spent over 10 years defending the rights of the communities from an unjust system privatising local forest resources in favour of major national and foreign companies. Her murder is a symbol, both of the dignity of the Mexican people, and of the unworthiness of those holding power.

It is in this context of permanent harassing, where there are no guarantees of personal safety for those opposing the companies' economic interests, where the rights to land and survival of the most vulnerable communities are constantly being violated, that the Strategic Forestry Plan (SFP), prepared by the Finnish firm of consultants, Indufor, is to be carried out.

Finnish environmental groups (WWF/Finland, Coalition for Environment and Development, FOE/Finland) alarmed by the news received through our bulletins (48 and 49), where we explained the opposition of Mexican social and forest groups to the plan prepared by the Finnish consulting firm, requested an interview with the Mexican delegate from the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) during his visit to Finland last October.

Informed about this meeting and at the request of the Finnish environmental organisations, we contacted Mexican groups, who formulated crucial questions to be asked to the Mexican authorities on issues that do not seem to have been foreseen in the plan and in particular about the impact on the local population of the policies proposed.

The complete minutes that the organisations participating in the meeting made available to us can be found on our web page at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Mexico/acta.html>

Summing up, the participating organisations expressed their concern over the way the Mexican government is applying the SFP, and on how issues such as democracy, human rights, community lands and environmental protection are being considered.

In spite of the fact that the Director General of CONAFOR, Carlos Gonzalez Vicente attempted to brush off the matter, simply stating that the process was democratic and open, the Executive Director, Alberto Cardenas and Pedro Ernesto del Castillo Cueva, Coordinator for Regional Managers, gave details: a meeting of 20 governors was held, there were state councils, there is much information on Internet, one thousand CDs were distributed to obtain comments on the plan, fora were organised with announcements published in the newspapers, there were state councils with participation of deputies, senators and representatives of various sectors of society.

The Finnish organisations stated that they found the openness and effectiveness of the above-mentioned consultation processes questionable, as 80% of the Mexican forests belong to poor social groups, with scant formal education, lacking easy access to the information media used by SFP (for example, computers, newspapers....). Furthermore, most of these people might find it very difficult to take part in the public meetings due to lack of money to travel or lack of information about them. Due

to these factors, the Finnish groups suggested that there was not certainty as to the process having really listened to the opinion of the most affected groups.

There were many issues on which the CONAFOR representatives made affirmations of doubtful credibility, in particular regarding participation, cooperation, work with underprivileged groups, the benefits the Mexicans will obtain from said plan, among others. It is particularly revealing in this respect to mention what the official delegates stated regarding the basic issue of land. According to Cardenas, there is no need for concern, Mexican laws are very clear. He mentioned article 27 of the Constitution and stated that this article prohibits the sale of community lands. The environmentalists reacted very rapidly, denying such a statement, as the changes introduced into article 27 have meant that community/ejido lands are now a property that may be sold.

Beyond the credibility or lack of credibility of the statements made at the meeting, are various aspects that warrant highlighting. In the first place, the monitoring by Finnish organisations of companies based in their own country, attempting to avoid that their actions result in social and environmental prejudice to third party countries. Secondly, the pressure implied, both for Finnish companies and for the Mexican government, by the knowledge that they are exposed to criticism at national and international level. Thirdly, the work carried out by Finnish and Mexican organisations joining to strengthen the struggle at local level through networking, reaching higher levels of pressure. All this means that the work is an inspiration to continue strengthening links among those who support a socially and environmentally sustainable world.