
Venezuela: Power line that kills

On 13 August, the presidents of Venezuela and Brazil, Hugo Chávez and Fernando Henrique Cardoso respectively, finalised an agreement made in 1997 and inaugurated an electric transmission line extending from Venezuela to the north of Brazil, in the state of Roraima. The 676 kilometres of high voltage cables which cost 400 million dollars and were the work of Electrificación del Caroní, a branch of the Corporación Venezolana de Guayana, will transmit 65 megawatts per hour. By the year 2020 this could increase to 200.

But this project has wounded to death the Gran Sabana, the Canaima National Park, the habitat of the Pemon indigenous people and the centre of Venezuela's biological diversity and water wealth.

The construction of the power lines has caused deforestation, erosion, loss of forests and other animal and plant habitats in the Canaima National Park. But it also implies the implantation of a development model that is foreign to the culture of the indigenous peoples of the Gran Sabana and the Imataca rainforest.

The service infrastructure set up around the project will attract various large-scale economic activities: legal and illegal mining, logging companies and tourism. The economic dynamics that will surely flourish around the power lines will not only disfigure the landscape but will also attack the ecological and cultural stability of the zone.

The Coalition Against The Electric Transmission Line has pointed out that developmentism is "a political and economic model that intervenes violently, with large-scale technology, on the ways of living, fragmenting, outcasting and disjointing individuals and their habitat, under the alibi of giving the population a better quality of life in the future."

From an environmental standpoint, the considerable number of openings that were cut to make way for the installation of the pylons, have now become great crevices due to the accelerated loss of soil that takes place in the Gran Sabana once it has been deprived of its plant cover. In other cases, these openings facilitate vehicles entering further into the National Park, thereby deteriorating zones that had been preserved from their entry. The water resources will also be affected as there will be a greater demand for water to keep up the levels of electricity production, implying an increase in the number of dams built.

The Society of Friends of the Gran Sabana, AMIGRANSA, have complained that the indigenous communities that have resisted have been repressed, while those who accepted the governmental agreements are already suffering from the fact that the agenda of commitments containing a set of measures agreed on to finalise the work on the lines transmitting energy to Brazil is not being complied with.

But additionally, this megaproject has broken the unity of the autochthonous peoples, giving way to one of the greatest internal confrontations in the history of these peoples. There are those who are willing to negotiate and those who are not willing to give up their sacred sites, their lands and their

resources. For the former, blackmail and psychological pressure: the basic rights set out in the new constitution are conditioned to the laying of the power lines. For the latter, intimidation: firing practice near the communities, distribution of pamphlets stating that the Indians would be bombed and that they would be excluded from state benefits.

In view of all this, it is at least sad to note the attempt made to show the electric interconnection between Venezuela and Brazil as a progressive political action through the means of inviting Fidel Castro to participate at the opening ceremony. However, there is nothing progressive about a typical “developmentist” project such as this, which has resulted in serious social and environmental impacts that will surely worsen as time goes on.

Article based on information from: Sociedad de Amigos en Defensa de la Gran Sabana (AMIGRANSA), and the Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA); Norberto J. Méndez, El Nacional, 26 de julio de 2001.