
Argentina: Forest conserved by the Wichí destroyed by agricultural companies

The story of the Hoktek T'oi community of the indigenous Wichí people in the Province of Salta (in the north of Argentina) is a story of suffering caused by state policies linked to economic interests. Over the past years, far from finding a solution to end a hundred years of usurpation and injustice, the authorities have only continued to attack the rights and the very existence of the Wichí people, who protected the tropical forest where they have always lived.

It is important to note that the Wichí people had been living on their territory for 12,000 years when, according to the elders of the Hoktek T'oi community, they saw the first white Argentines. Following them came the loggers who, in addition to exploiting indigenous human resources, logged and sold the wood from the forest where for centuries the community had practised sustainable hunting, gathering and cultivation. In spite of being the legitimate ancestral owners, the community was recognised as having “legal” ownership over 27 hectares of its own territory. They were dispossessed of seventy-five thousand hectares.

Since 1910, the community's territory has changed “owners”, until in 1966 the deeds of the land surrounding the Hoktek T'oi community were drawn up in the name of the agricultural company “Los Cordobeses S.A.” As a start, the company attempted to move the community, but its members resisted. Knowledgeable about the area, they knew the company wanted to move them to a site that was easily flooded. Faced by this resistance, the company shut in the community by means of a “donation” of 27 hectares, that the company proceeded to fence in. Seeking advice and support, the Wichí from this community turned to the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (PAHR) and it was thus that they established a community organisation with the aim of defending their territory.

The company did not delay in taking reprisals. Making use of the deforestation permit granted by the government of the Province of Salta, the company started to devastate the native forest and, at the same time, the environment and the community's means of subsistence. The numerous attempts made by the community to stop this permit being granted to the company were all in vain. Neither the provincial authorities responsible for the defense of indigenous communities, nor those responsible for the environment, nor justice itself, gave any follow-up to the complaints made by the Wichí regarding this cultural genocide and the irreparable social and environmental damage caused by deforestation.

With the sanction of four different tribunals, the damage is being done in total impunity. The millenary forest is being eliminated with heavy machinery and chains, the tree trunks, branches and roots are burnt. The plantations are sprayed from the air and so are the people from the community; there have even been attempts at destroying their homes and their graveyard. All this, linked to permanent threats are among the innumerable abuses that the Los Cordobeses company and their tenants, Cremer S.A. and Mirco S.A. have been committing over the past few years.

Presently the Hoktek T'oi community is a green island in the middle of brown fields, where the forest has definitively been destroyed and substituted by agricultural plantations. The company, not

satisfied with what it had already devoured of the forest, attempted several times (with a bulldozer, with the police, with hired staff and with a notary public), to make the green island housing the community even smaller. They wanted to cut it down to one third and evict the community.

The Wichí resisted again, physically, politically and legally. They lodged action against “Los Cordobeses” in the local Justice, in order to prevent eviction and defend the remnant native forest.

This legal action lasted a whole year and involved many hearings, which the company regularly failed to attend. Although it lacked resources, the community did not give up its rights and insisted with its claim. Furthermore it had the support of a strong campaign at national and international level carried out by non governmental organisations and solidary individuals, who sent letters to the judge hearing the case and to the governor of the Province of Salta, urging them to respect the community’s legal rights. The campaign included three urgent actions taken by the WRM. It was thus that the Wichí finally achieved legal recognition of their possession of the 44 hectares of the green island, maintained as an oasis of life surrounded by the depredation caused by the company “locusts”, as the Wichí themselves define them. However the company has not given up and on 23 August it appealed against the Judge’s sentence in favour of the Wichí.

Two years ago the community submitted an expropriation bill to the Argentine Congress, whereby it attempts to recover an area of 3,000 hectares of forest, about 4% of its territory. The Bill has already half a sanction as it was unanimously approved by the Chamber of Deputies last November. While its discussion in the Senate is still pending, the 3,000 hectares are being deforested. If this bill is not passed quickly, the land will become a desert that will be of no use to anyone, not even the locusts.

While the Argentine government solemnly signs any environmental or social agreement prepared at international level (on forests, biodiversity, climate, human rights, or whatever), the Wichí have been obliged to follow intricate administrative and legal channels --complaints, audiences, inspections, proceedings and appeals-- to defend the forest and their rights. The Hoktek T’oi community has always been responsible for “ensuring the preservation of the native forests in the Province, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance,” as required by the national law, totally ignored by authorities, judges and lawyers representing a racist provincial state, just as guilty or more so than the companies themselves that are today causing the agony of the Wichí people.

It is time for Argentina to recognise the still denied existence of the indigenous Wichí people. It is time for their territorial and cultural rights to be recognised. It is time for justice to be done. The resistance of the Wichí must be supported by all, but first of all by the inhabitants of the province and the country where this tragedy is taking place. For more information (in Spanish) on the Wichí,