
Chile: Repression or solution to the Mapuche-forestry company confrontation?

A few days ago, serious events took place in the city of Temuco, ending in over 125 community members in jail, many injured and serious destruction. These incidents are the result of a long chain of encroachments that the Mapuche people have suffered throughout the whole of the twentieth century and that have not been recognised either publicly or fundamentally by the State, which continues to act in favour of forestry companies, providing them with all kinds of support, among which, placing the police force at the companies' service.

Days before these events, the headquarters of the Mapuche organisation Consejo de Todas las Tierras was destroyed by a police contingent which threw tear gas, broke windows and attempted to evict by force twenty Mapuche who were inside the premises. This repressive police operation was carried out in compliance with an "order" by the attorneys Alberto Chifelle – pointed out by Mapuche organisations as being involved in encroaching on land – and Francisco Rojas, to "gather background information."

In repudiation of this senseless act of vandalism --the Police commander stated that he had no knowledge of it-- a peaceful march took place in the centre of the city of Temuco. Nine Mapuche organisations of the region participated in this march, the most important one to be held over the past few years. The peaceful climate was altered when a strong contingent of police arrived, supported by water-throwing police vans, armoured cars and police on horseback, with the aim of dispersing the demonstrators.

According to the newspaper "La Tercera" the police confirmed that significant damage was done to public property and that "these had been the more violent action than ever taken place in this region." They added that those under arrest would be placed at the disposal of the Military Prosecutor, some of them for maltreatment of police officers while on duty, others for significant damage and the rest for disorder.

However, those who have the most right to talk of damage and violence are the Mapuche, who over the past years have insistently complained of the asphyxiation and penning in that the communities bordering with forestry companies suffer, the loss of their lands, the lack of productivity and scarcity of water caused by alien tree plantations, the forced emigrations, the presence of para-military forestry security groups, the conspiracies, sabotage and repressive attitude of the companies against the Mapuche, the arbitrary arrests and legal processes.

According to a letter from José Aylwin, lawyer for indigenous matters from the Institute of Indigenous Studies, University of la Frontera, for a long time now the Mapuche have been voicing their disagreement with the processes that are taking place on their ancestral lands, affecting their rights. Basically he highlights the expansion of forestry activities over lands that historically belong to the Mapuche and are recognised and protected by legislation because of their indigenous nature. The plantation of alien trees has literally enclosed the communities within their own ancestral lands (the forestry companies own 1.5 million hectares of land to the south of the Bio Bio) seriously affecting the

Mapuche land and waters.

In spite of the fact that forestry companies claim to have Constitutional rights over the lands they possess, since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Mapuche “have seen their lands gradually diminish, first through their establishment in reservations, then by the division and confiscation of their communal lands promoted by the State, and later, through the loss of land that was granted to them during the agrarian reform. This is a process that the Mapuche have a name for: usurpation.”

All this has led to an increasing gap between the Mapuche world and the State and the private companies present on their territory. The Mapuche are claiming what --according to their history, conception of the world, their system of norms and values-- they consider belongs to them and has been taken from them. For its part, the State imposes its law.. The consequence of this lack of communication is the violent situation presently reigning in the Mapuche communities and progressively getting worse.

As to the acts of violence, José Aylwin states that “there is an enormous lack of proportion between the Mapuche action and the force used by the State agents, or even private security agents, to repress the indigenous people.” As a matter of concern is the fact that “the use of fire-arms by the police against the Mapuche people involved in action in defence of their rights, has now become a routine” and also “that the police forces act together with the companies that are present on Mapuche territorial space. Such is the case of the joint action of Carabineros, Police Investigators and forestry company guards in the area of Malleco. This is an openly illegal action, that cannot continue to be protected by the authorities.”

The government has two paths to follow, either the honest search for solutions or the increase of repression. For the time being it would seem that they have decided on the second option, which is clearly a dead-end, as seen by the escalation of violence in the South. It is time that the Chilean State takes on its historical responsibility in the drama of the Mapuche people and that it starts looking for real solutions, which necessarily involve returning the lands encroached on by forestry companies during the Pinochet dictatorship.

Article is based on information from: La Tercera, 26 de julio 2001 “El tema mapuche en los medios de comunicación de la sociedad chilena”.

Carta del abogado indigenista José Aylwin