
Guatemala: Security for shrimps, insecurity for the local population

Since the beginning of May, the Champerico community has been denouncing contamination of wetlands, the logging of mangroves (activity prohibited by the Environmental Law), closing of access to public wetlands, acts of repression against fishermen (about 70% of the local population's diet is fish) and death of fish caused by the operations of Camarones del Sur, S.A. (Camarsa).

The indifference of the Guatemalan authorities towards serious infringement of the law by Camarsa, has triggered off various demonstrations, resulting in the death of a young man, Moytin Castellanos, as we had reported in WRM bulletin 46, in addition to various other people being injured.

Since the establishment of the Commission for resolution of conflicts, comprising senior government officials, the community has been demanding that Camarsa immediately cease its operations due to the serious irregularities involved in its operation.

This Commission met with representatives of the community without reaching any concrete result. Progress has been almost non-existent and the shrimp company continues operating, in spite of the commitment taken on by the Commission to immediately investigate complaints made by the local inhabitants. The frustration of the people of Champerico, who demand concrete response to the impunity with which Camarsa is operating, has not been long in making itself felt.

The population recently held another demonstration outside the shrimp factory installations, preventing people from entering into the factory. The demonstration ended with serious confrontations, during which Fernando Chiyoc died and seven people received bullet wounds from the security guards and other Camarsa employees. So far, the US citizen, Mike Corser, an engineer at Camarsa has been arrested, together with nine of the company's security guards, accused of homicide and attempted homicide.

However, the population fears that this may be yet another case of impunity. The facts are very serious and so far, no convincing response has been given by any responsible authority.

As if this were not enough, Camarsa delegates have interrupted negotiations, demanding that the local population submit evidence of the impact caused by the company's activities. However, the local NGO, Trópico Verde, states that "according to Guatemalan environmental laws (Legislative Decree 68-86, Law for the Protection and Enhancement of the Environment and Forestry Law, Decree 70-89, Regulation, Government Agreement 961-90) shrimp farming activities have the obligation to study the impact they will cause, provide measures to mitigate this impact and implement them. In other words, Guatemalan laws presume that an activity of this nature may cause damage to the environment, and therefore Camarsa is not justified in requesting third parties to show evidence of the contamination it produces.

In spite of this, Trópico Verde, together with the artisan fishermen from Champerico have carried out research, showing that there is contamination of wetlands and a serious lack of compliance with the environmental laws of the country. A full report on the issue -"The impact of shrimp farming activities

in Champerico, Retalhuleu, Guatemala"- is available in Spanish on our web page:
<http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Guatemala/Champerico.html>

So far, the government has tried to pull a curtain of smoke over the problem instead of solving it. Company interests are at stake here, and pressure is evident. In the meanwhile, contamination by the shrimp company and violation of Guatemalan laws continue and the two thousand families affected in Champerico are going through hard times, caused by the impunity with which Camarsa acts.

The moment is critical and support from the international community is of invaluable assistance. For more information on the request for action, see the July section "requests for action" in our web page: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/alerts/july01.html#1> or contact Trópico Verde directly in Guatemala: mailto@tropicoverde.org

Article based on information from: Carlos Albacete, Trópico Verde, "Los impactos de la actividad camaronera en Champerico, Retalhuleu, Guatemala.", June, 2001.