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## Costa Rica: Indigenous territory threatened by hydroelectric dam

Since the 1970's, the Costa Rican government has been carrying out studies to implement the Boruca Hydroelectric Project on the river Térraba which, with a 1,500 megawatt generating capacity, would be the largest project of the type in Central America.

If the 260 metre high dam were built, it would mean the flooding of 25,000 hectares of lands, among which the entire Rey Curré Reserve and parts of the Térraba and Boruca territories. At the same time, the Ujarrás, Salitre and Cabagra reserves would be also affected by dam-related infrastructures such as roads. For both the indigenous and peasant communities living in the area, the building of the dam would imply their relocation to other parts of the country.

Until now, the Costa Rican Energy Institute has provided the affected communities with very superficial information, preventing their access to detailed written information about the true impacts that the project would have on them. Informed consent to the project is thus impossible.

With such attitude, the government is infringing the Indigenous Law (No. 6172 of 29 November 1977) and Article 16 of the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, ratified by Costa Rica in 1992 (Law No. 7316, 3 November 1992), which states: "the peoples concerned shall not be removed from the lands which they occupy. Where the relocation of these peoples is considered necessary as an exceptional measure, such relocation shall take place only with their free and informed consent. Where their consent cannot be obtained, such relocation shall take place only following appropriate procedures established by national laws and regulations, including public inquiries where appropriate, which provide the opportunity for effective representation of the peoples concerned." Additionally, the government would be also violating the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, because the project would affect the famous Térraba-Sierpe Wetland, the largest Ramsar Site of the country's Pacific coast and one of the major mangrove systems of Central America.

What's the reason for so many social and environmental impacts? Contrary to the usual discourse of improving people's lives by providing them with electric energy, in this case the project is aimed --in words of President Miguel Angel Rodríguez-- at providing Mexico and the United States with cheap energy (La Extra, 4 April 2001). At the same time, the whole project would generate large benefits to constructing and energy transnationals, because the Costa Rican Energy Institute would seek "strategic alliances with large foreign companies" to finance the project (La Nación, 21 May 2000).

In March this year, local people signed a "Manifesto of the indigenous communities affected by the Eventual Construction of the Boruca Hydroelectric Project, which ended with the following words: "Our history, our identity and our cosmovision have since time immemorial been intimately linked to the earth, the rivers and every expression of nature in our territories. To abandon our territories for us implies death, the end of our history" and we declare:

- "- Our total opposition to the Boruca Hydroelectric Project
- We call on national and international solidarity

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- We urge international financial institutios to abstain from financing this project."

Article based on information from: Manifiesto de las Comunidades Indigenas Afectadas por el Eventual Proyecto Hidroelectrico Boruca Costa Rica, sent by Gabriel Rivas-Ducca, COECOCEIBA-Amigos de la Tierra Costa Rica, Territorio Indigena Amenazado por el Proyecto Hidroelectrico Boruca, IETSAY, 16 May 2001.