Colombia: The Urrá Dam and the death of the Sinú River

The Urrá Dam megaproject on the Sinú River in the Department of Córdoba, in the Colombian Atlantic region, constitutes a worldwide known environmental catastrophe as well as a complete disaster to the local people. The dam built by the company Urrá and openly supported by the Colombian government --which considers the project vital for the country's economy-- will flood more than 7,000 hectares of forests and directly affect the livelihoods and the very existence of the Embera Katío indigenous people and the fisherfolk communities of the area.

Urrá's story is a very long and painful one. The project has provoked concern and resistance since its start in 1977. The Embera Katío indigenous people, ancestral dwellers of the affected area, who live on fishing and hunting, and the fishing communities of the Upper Sinú, with the support of national and international organizations, have repeatedly claimed against this megaproject and resorted to every peaceful available way, including trials at the Court, interviews with the authorities and occupations of Ministry buildings and resistance to abandon their lands. Nevertheless, both Urrá and the Ministry of the Environment have ignored them, as well as several decisions of the Constitutional High Court of Colombia. The works continued and in November 1999 the filling up of the Urrá 1 dam on the Sinú River began.

In the meantime, Urrá also tried to generate conflicts among the Embera Katío and to weaken their resistance by reaching partial agreements with some of their groups to the detriment of the others. During this unequal struggle, the Embera Katío and the fisherfolk, as well as many of those who support them, have also suffered severe human rights violations, some of them being even murdered, threatened or forced into exile. The Department of Córdoba, where the dam is located, is controlled by paramilitary groups.

An international mission of independent observers that visited the conflict area in March 2000 confirmed the environmental and social impacts of the project. Downstream from the dam, the river level has already decreased dramatically, resulting in the collapse of the river's banks and the entailing destruction of the peoples' houses. The population of the fish "bocachico" --which is the main source of protein for the Embera Katío and a basic product in the economy of the local fisherfolk, has drastically decreased because of the sudden dry up of the wetlands of Ciénaga Grande de Lorica and other wetlands of the Lower Sinú, provoked by the reduction of the natural floods of the river after the construction of the dam. The reservoir was filled up without removing the existent biomass, which will result in the eutrophication of waters and increase the emissions of methane and carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, the two main greenhouse gases. Logging and burning of wood is being practised in several places nearby the dam, which will further enhance the sedimentation process in the reservoir.

The loss of their lands by the Embera Katío is complete. Additionally, those living upstream are powerless to prevent the flooding of their fields, houses, sacred sites and cemeteries. Effects are also apparent downstream. Because of the disruption of the hydrological system, the natural flow has diminished and water quality has deteriorated disturbing the food network. Further impacts are anticipated on plankton, riparian vegetation, invertebrates, birds and other animals. The Sinú River is

dying.

What will happen with the indigenous people and fisherfolk displaced from their world in contact with nature? Without land and resources, and deprived of their own culture, they will be forced to settle in any of the shanty towns existing in the main Colombian cities. "Dueda tu beu ea embera neta Embera ea" (“The life and the dignity of the Embera Katío will not be drowned”) is the motto of a struggle that goes on to avoid such an appalling future.

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