
Chile: The struggle of the Pehuenche against the Ralco Dam

The Biobío River springs from Icalma and Galletue lakes in the Andes, in southern Chile and flows during 380 km through forests, agricultural lands and cities to the Pacific Ocean, draining a watershed of 24,260 km². Over one million people use the resources of the Biobío for drinking and irrigation water, recreation, and fisheries.

In the decade of 1990, Spanish corporation ENDESA (Empresa Nacional de Electricidad S.A) began to implement its plan to install six hydroelectric dams on the Biobío, with a total capacity of 2,300 megawatts. Plans to dam the Biobío originated in the 1950s, when electricity generation in Chile was still state-owned. The first dam, called Pangue, was completed in 1996, and now the company is working in the construction of Ralco, the largest of the planned dams in the Biobío.

During the construction of Pangue, started in 1990, severe impacts took place to the detriment of forests and the Pehuenche indigenous people, traditional inhabitants of the region who resist any attempt of displacing them from their territories. The role of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) --private sector arm of the World Bank-- was severely questioned because of its lack of transparency and its financial support to such an unsustainable project. During a visit to Santiago in April 1998, Mr. James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, admitted that the Bank's support to the Pangue hydroelectric project had been a mistake, and that the Bank had performed "bad work" during the evaluation of the environmental impact of the project, since the Pehuenche indigenous peoples that inhabit the area had not been consulted. Nevertheless this sad story is being repeated in the case of Ralco.

The construction of the 570 megawatt Ralco Dam started shortly after Pangue was completed, because both dams are supposed to work together for the generation of electric energy. As a matter of fact, the Ralco Dam has been designed to regulate the water flow to the Pangue and the other dams proposed downstream. This 155 meter-high dam with a 3,400 hectare reservoir, would displace more than 600 people, including 400 indigenous Pehuenches. The dam would flood over 70 km of the river valley, inundating the richly diverse forest and destroying its biodiversity.

The Pehuenche, supported by the Biobío Action Group, went to court and at the same time implemented direct actions on the ground to avoid that the works for Ralco continue. They completely refuse to abandon their ancestral lands and to accept the resettlement plans of ENDESA to locate them in a place high in the Andes, where harsh conditions during winter reign. Reality is giving the reason to the opponents of the resettlement: a few families who have already been relocated to the El Huachi and El Barco areas have publicly denounced ENDESA's failure to honour its commitments to them in exchange for their land. They are suffering their livestock's miserable condition during the heavy winter snows, lack of technical assistance, shortage of firewood and lack of medical assistance. Pehuenche women are playing a leading role in this struggle, facing the arrogance of ENDESA and the indifference of the Chilean authorities.

In spite of the growing awareness at home and abroad about the severe impacts that dams are generating in the Biobío area, the Export Development Corporation of Canada's government is

granting financing equivalent to US\$ 17 million dollars for the ENDESA company to purchase generating equipment for the planned Ralco Power Station, from the ABB Power Canada company of Tracy, Quebec.

The future of the Pehuenche and the Ralco Dam is now in the hands of Justice. In essence, this is a court battle between the Indigenous Law of 1993, designed to protect the lands of the indigenous population, and the Electricity Law passed during Pinochet's regime, that promotes any energy generation project. Nevertheless, much depends on the mobilisation of the Pehunche people for environmental justice and the support it can achieve at the national and international levels. Within this context, the Heinrich Böll Foundation's decision to award the Petra Kelly Prize 2000 to two Mapuche women --Berta and Nicolasa Quintremán Calpán-- as a recognition of their struggle to protect the Mapuche Pehuenche's rights shows the increasing international support to this struggle.

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