
Venezuela: "Stop it, Mr. President" say indigenous Pemon leaders

The inclusion in the Venezuelan National Constitution --approved in 1999-- of a chapter that establishes legal rights for indigenous peoples and indigenous communities in line with International Labour Organization Convention 169 led to the idea that indigenous peoples in that country would be in a better position to protect their environment and their traditions against the powerful interests that in the name of "progress" want to destroy them.

However, things appear not to have changed much in real life. The Pemon indigenous people continue to fight against the construction of a high-voltage power line in the south-eastern Gran Sabana region, that will cross the Brazilian border.

Four indigenous leaders have recently asked President Chávez to stop the works. "They understand the world as something that can be divided into small boxes. For us the world is a round place, where the gods, sacred sites, great rocks, large rivers, mountains, plants and animals coexist; where the sun impregnates the earth so that she can give birth. And as part of nature there is the indigenous people". Silviano Castro, from San Rafael de Kamoirán; Melchor Flores, from Mapaurí; Cleto Javier Ramírez, from Agua Fría; and Darío Castro, from San Juan de Kamoirán addressed the Venezuelan President with this cosmologic view of the world as perceived by the Penan people.

The government had tried to convince them that the power line is a good thing for them. Vicepresident Isaías Rodríguez himself, accompanied by Army and National Guard representatives, organized a meeting with the steering committee of the Bolívar Indigenous Federation. The government offered them U\$S 200,000 to create a fund devoted to the Federation. In a move to weaken opposition against the project, the government took to Caracas some indigenous leaders who did not oppose the works with the aim of signing an agreement. Many of them did not even speak Spanish . . .

President Chávez showed his satisfaction for such agreement and thanked the vicepresident for his work. The four Pemon leaders consider they have been deceived and claim "Itachimak, tatadepurú", "Stop it, Mr. President". They wonder what is the use of having a new Constitution, indigenous representatives at the National Assembly and even an indigenous individual as Minister for the Environment, if in every case the Pemon will be condemned to disappear. The disruption of modern economy activities in the area --under the form of high voltages power lines, mining and luxury tourism-- would mean the destruction of their livelihoods and culture, based in the simplicity of nature and a life in harmony with it. No money can substitute this.

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