
Bolivia: Indigenous peoples' forests menaced by oil exploration

Bolivia hosts 440,000 sq.km of rainforests, which represent 57% of the lowlands total surface in the country. Deforestation rate reaches 168,000 hectares/year, being the promotion of export crops and logging concessions wantonly granted the main causes of this problem. Environmental NGOs have frequently expressed their concern over the situation of the forestry sector in Bolivia, characterized by the disrespect to indigenous traditional territories and the inefficiency of the government to adequately address the problem (see WRM Bulletin 22).

Oil exploration and exploitation is also a depredatory activity affecting Bolivian forests and forest peoples. It has recently been denounced that the company Repsol (mainly composed of Spanish capitals) has entered the Multiethnic Indigenous Territory in the Amazon Forest to perform topographic measurements prior to the drilling of the Eva Eva well. Inhabitants of the town of San Ignacio de Moxos have said that Repsol has already advanced 90 kilometres into the forest, using a road previously opened by loggers. Once more such roads are the way to further destruction of the forest.

The Multiethnic Indigenous Territory is not a void space. Indigenous peoples -Trinitary, Mojeño and Chimán- live there. Since Repsol does not count on the necessary environmental license to operate, this action is but an invasion of the indigenous territory. Eva Eva, at Beni Province, is the first well the company aims to drill. The second one is the Samusabeti well, which will affect an area inhabited by the Quichua and Aymara indigenous peoples, already hit by repression against illegal plantations. In relation to the Isiboro well, at Isiboro Sécure National Park, the environmental impact assessment presented by Repsol was severely observed by the environmental authority because the special features of that protected area had been ignored.

Once again Repsol is violating national and international norms regarding indigenous rights and the protection of the environment. During 1995-1998 Bolivian NGOs repeatedly denounced the company for the opening of 1,200 kilometres of seismic trails and the pollution of several water courses.

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