
Colombia: The U'wa and Embera join forces

As part of their struggle to prevent the occupation of their lands by Occidental Petroleum (Oxy), a group of about 200 members of the U'wa indigenous peoples established in November 1999 a camp in the area where the company is planning to drill the oil well "Gibraltar 1" with the approval of the Colombian Environment Ministry, which all along this conflict has disregarded the U'wa's rights and defended the interests of Oxy (see WRM Bulletin 30).

Tension in the region increased on February 11th when combined forces of the police and the army assaulted the zone of Las Canoas, close to Gibraltar, where nearly 450 U'wa men, women and children were settled. A violent repression took place and the indigenous people were forced to abandon the area. Seeking to escape, many of them threw themselves into the Cubujón River, and as a consequence three indigenous children drowned, while several men and women were injured and others disappeared. The Colombian Government as well as Oxy are to be blamed for these innocent deaths and for the violence exerted against defenseless people, which constitute a serious violation to their most elementary human rights.

A similar situation is that of the Embera Katío at the Sinú river upper watershed, whose ancestral territories, livelihoods and culture are threatened by the Urrá hydroelectric dam megaproject, which has also received support from the Environment Ministry. Peaceful protests and claims to international bodies have been carried out to stop this destructive project (see WRM Bulletins 29 and 30). Nonetheless, as in the case of the U'wa, the traditional and destructive "development" model still seems to prevail, but support for the Embera's struggle is increasing. In a press release issued on March 8th the 99 communities of indigenous peoples, fisherfolks and peasants of the Sinú river lower watershed have expressed that, given the present state of things, they will begin to act openly in defense of their Embera brothers and sisters in case they are expelled from their lands. They categorically blame the government for the situation of violence reigning in the area and for having refused to dialogue with the affected people.

The U'wa and the Embera have now joined forces and are organizing the visit of an international mission to Colombia this March, composed of representatives of human rights, social and environmental organizations from several parts of the world. The main objective of the mission, which will start visiting the affected areas in March 18th, is "to witness the situation of imminent danger the Embera Katío and U'wa peoples are suffering and to make the government implement the agreements that guarantee their survival". The mission will be aimed at assisting them in their struggle based on "the right to live as indigenous cultures, to have alternative life and development options".

Sources: CENSAT Agua Viva, 11/2/2000 and 9/3/2000, Camaemka, 25/2/2000;

