Colombia: "the life and dignity of the Embera people won't be flooded"

The Urra hydroelectric dam megaproject in Colombia is causing negative impacts on the Embera Katio indigenous people, ancestral dwellers of the affected area. With the support of Colombian and international NGOs, the Embera Katio are bravely opposing the project boasted by the government, which menaces the permanence of their livelihoods and the survival or their entire culture (see WRM Bulletin 29).

As part of their resistance activities, last December a large group of indigenous families marched on foot to Bogotá in order to demand to the central authorities the immediate suspension of the dam works and to protest against the permanent state of insecurity and violence they are suffering because of the crossfire between guerrillas and paramilitary groups, who are trying to force them off their land.

The protesters reached Bogotá before Christmas after a long march. The group, formed by 100 men, 60 women and 30 children gathered in Bolívar Plaza in downtown Bogotá, where they said they would remain until the government heard their grievances. They denounced that the Environment Ministry had authorised the filling of the dam's reservoir without complying with the required process of consulting the affected communities, as stipulated by the 1991 National Constitution, whose Article 79 states that "everyone has the right to enjoy a healthy environment" and that "the law will guarantee the participation of society in those decisions that can affect it". They also stated that the construction of the Urra dam has ignored the rights of indigenous local residents, which were confirmed by a 1998 Supreme Court ruling.

On December 23, while the flooding of their territory by the dam works was beginning, a group of Embera Katio occupied the entry of the building of the Ministry of the Environment. At the same time they went on with their mobilization at the international level, asking the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights to take preventive steps against the Colombian government so that the filling of the dam reservoir be immediately halted and a compensation for the environmental damages caused was paid.

In spite of his rhetoric Mr Juan Mayr, a former environmentalist and today Minister of the Environment, continues to deny the possibility of an open and sincere dialogue with the affected indigenous communities and has in fact decreed their death. Nevertheless, the struggle of the Embera Katio for life continues. As they say: "The life and dignity of the Embera people won't be flooded" ("Dueda tu beu ea embera neta Embera ea").

Sources: Editor Equipo Nizkor, 25/12/99; Amazon Alliance, 3/1/2000;