Ecuador: the future of the Chachi indigenous people and their forests

Mache-Chindul rainforests and mangroves, located in the Province of Esmeraldas in the Ecuadorian Pacific region hold high levels of biodiversity. Additionally, this province is a multicultural complex formed by different ethnic groups -indigenous, black and "mestizos", as the Chachi, the Emperas, the Awa, Afro-Esmeraldian population and landless peasants who arrived there as colonists expelled from other regions of the country. For about three decades the province has been suffering a deforestation and forest degradation process: in 1958 there were 2,750,000 hectares of forests and nowadays only 500,000 remain, having the rest been transformed into agricultural or pasture lands.

The forests of Mache-Chindul are part of these relicts, most of which are located in the indigenous Chachi territory, occupying an area of some 18,000 hectares. The communities of San Salvador, Balzar and Chorrera Grande, together with more than 30 scattered colonists' settlements live there. When the first Chachi families arrived there, in the decade of 1930, the area was completely void. Until the end of the 60s the Chachi lived in relative isolation, using the rivers for transportation, and developing sustainable production practices based on shifting agriculture, hunting, fishing, handicraft production and the gathering of products from the forest.

A colonization process started in the decade of 1970, being its agents the poor peasants displaced from their original lands. Later on, the situation increasingly worsened because of the expansion of banana cultivation, logging and further land invasions. The ensuing confrontation over land was very violent and on June 22 1988 the Chachi Lorenzo Anapa was murdered. As time went by the situation became more and more serious. On August 7 this year another murder occurred: that of a Chachi youth -Norberto Anapa de la Cruz- from the community of San Salvador to the hands of still unidentified colonists which had invaded the indigenous territory. Additionally, it has been denounced that displaced peasants from the neighbouring Province of Manabi are harassing members of the Chachi communities by destroying their crops, stealing their cattle and even assaulting them in the roads of the area.

This situation of every day violence that the Chachi are undergoing is not just the sum of isolated events. From the beginning of the present decade they are suffering an aculturization process caused by their forced integration into the commercial circuit, which has led them to increase use pressure on their forests. At the same time, the continuous advance of land invasion and colonization has undermined their material basis of existence and weakened their traditional way of life.

In Ecuador successive governments have completely disregarded the protection of the environment and natural resources as well as the safeguard of indigenous peoples. The Chachi have also been abandoned to their fate. Direct and indirect causes that give way by this state of affairs are not addressed and no steps are taken to halt the violence that the Chachi have been suffering for years. Only initiatives from civil society have been undertaken in order to make coexistence possible between colonists and indigenous peoples -both victims of the present situation- in a framework of sustainability. Nevertheless, such efforts are not enough and will not work if the authorities continue to ignore the problem.