
Venezuela: the Pemons' struggle

The Pemon indigenous people are opposing a project of construction of a high-voltage power line 470-mile long across Conaima National Park in the south-eastern Gran Sabana region. At the beginning of October they carried out a direct action by knocking down an electricity tower and blockading a key highway linking the country to Brazil.

In a press release the Pemon, who call themselves "Rainbow Warriors", said they would continue to knock down at least one a day until they reach an agreement with the government. They also said that they had detained three trucks from state agencies that were being used to build the line.

Their struggle is supported by environmental NGOs, which contend the line will damage the rich and fragile ecosystem of the Park and disturb indigenous communities. According to the official viewpoint, the power line means "progress" for the region since it will provide electricity to gold mining and to the indigenous villages themselves. Considering the environmental effects of gold mining on the environment -forests included- and the cultural impact of this kind of projects on the indigenous way of life, the power line construction will certainly not mean an improvement for the Pemons' lives and that's why they are strongly opposing it. A similar protest was conducted last year, which prompted the government to interrupt the works till last May.

Indigenous peoples of Venezuela are at the same time actively participating in the process leading to a new constitution. On November 3, the 131-member Venezuelan National Constituent Assembly voted to include a chapter in the new constitution that establishes legal rights for indigenous peoples and indigenous communities in line with International Labour Organization Convention 169. Chapter VIII would guarantee "the right to exist as indigenous peoples and communities with their own social and economic organization, their cultures and traditions, and their land. The entire new Constitution will be submitted to a referendum vote on December 12.

If -as expected- the new constitution is approved, the Pemon and other indigenous peoples will be in a much better position to protect their environment and their traditions against the destructive forces which until now have prevailed.

Sources: Guillermo Holzmann, 3/10/99; Amazon Watch, 4/11/99.