
Colombia: violence and deforestation in the Choco region

Colombian forests are undergoing a severe process of destruction. The civil war that is devastating the country can be considered one of the main causes of deforestation. Due to the prevailing state of violence in Colombia, entire rural communities are obliged to leave their homes and lands. Additionally to their effects from a social and cultural point of view, forced displacements also create conditions for further negative impacts on forests.

The Pacific Region of the country, known for its abundance of natural resources and cultural richness, as well as for the constant process of depredation that it has suffered since colonial times (see WRM Bulletin 27) is victim of this type of activities. The Forcibly Displaced Afro-Colombian Communities of the Cacarica Basin of the Choco, provisionally settled in Turbo, Bocas del Atrato and Bahia Cupica have denounced the illegal and indiscriminate deforestation of their lands by the YIREH cooperative. This company is apparently operating in connection with the logging corporation Darien Woods Company (Maderas de El Darien).

While the community resists returning to their lands until the Colombian government fulfills their list of conditions for what they call a "Return with Dignity", the above named company is taking advantage of their absence to log in the territories that have been legally awarded to the communities under Law 70 for Black Ethnic Communities. Moreover, the communities have reported acts of harassment by paramilitaries, who are trying to intimidate them so as to avoid their opposition to logging activities in their territory. It is important to mention that the Cacarica Basin borders the Los Katios National Park, which is home to one of the highest levels of biodiversity per square mile in the world.

From August 19 to 21 a verification commission integrated by representatives of the communities, national and international NGOs, parliamentarians and delegates from government bodies, travelled to the area to investigate the ongoing deforestation process. The following is a translation of the Communities' testimony, published in their newsletter "Humanos del Mundo":

"...We were witnesses, together with representatives from government bodies and institutions of the State, of the horrendous scenario of deforestation that Maderas de El Darien is causing in the region of the Cacarica. Before our very eyes we saw two boats pass by -belonging to this company- towing through the river more than 400 trees belonging to endangered species of the "catival" forests. We heard high-tech heavy machinery that does not sink into the muddy swampland; we saw how they continued opening channels to take out our natural wealth; we were saddened by the occupation of our school buildings that have now been turned into camps for the workers. We are not lying: large companies are turning our territory into a cemetery for nature; no longer did we walk through the trees but rather with the sun hitting our foreheads. This is an Ecocide."

According to testimonies obtained from the company's workers, CODECHOCO -the governmental body in charge of granting logging contracts in the region- is aware of the illegal deforestation and has done nothing to stop it. Such omission and negligence is collaborating with the massive destruction of the forest.

An action at the international level is being carried out to stop this destruction. You can address the following Colombian authorities, expressing your concern on the accelerated deforestation and the suffering of the communities of the Cacarica Basin, and calling for an immediate suspension of every logging contract in the area: