Chile: the Mapuche conflict persists

The Mapuche people, who inhabit the southern region of Chile, have been historically victims of social and cultural exclusion. The invasion of their territories by huge plantation companies -with the support of the state- has resulted in the destruction of large areas of forests and their substitution by pine and eucalyptus monocultures. The Mapuche have recently increased their struggle, demanding effective solutions to the Chilean state, which after decades of complete indiference with regard to this conflict has now reacted through a combination of repression and charitable aid. A so called development programme aimed at combatting poverty in the Mapuche indigenous communities, approved in August 1999, was strongly criticized by Mapuche representatives (see WRM Bulletin 26).

Physical violence, threats, bribes, criminal proceedings, arbitrary detentions are some of the means being used by armed corps and forestry companies to intimidate the Mapuche. A worker of the forestry company Mininco recently admitted that he had been bribed to falsely accuse a group of Mapuche of commiting vandalic acts against Mininco's property. The Mapuche leaders of Cuyinco community, which are imprisoned in Lebu, have denounced ill treatment and demand the immediate release of all Mapuche political prisoners. At the same time direct actions of resistance are taking place in different locations in the South of Chile.
Their struggle has gained in strength and organization. Even if they are facing a powerful enemy, they have made clear that their aim is to recover their traditional territories, since this is the only guarantee to achieve the possibility of living in accordance with their culture, in harmony with the environment. The conflict of the Mapuche has not only let the international public opinion know about the situation of this people, but has also helped to show that the Chilean forestry development style, exported to other countries of the region as a model to be copied, is based on the depredation of nature and the exploitation of local communities.

Sources: Susana Gentil, 10/9/99; Dario Jana, 29/9/99