
Honduras: only the fury of nature?

Just one year after the destructive arrival of hurricane Mitch, Honduras is suffering the consequences of storms and flooding that have provoked the evacuation of thousands of peasants and the death of eight people until now. Hundreds of homes and crops have been destroyed. The media reproduce tragic images of suffering people and emphasize in the fury of nature as a cause of such disasters. The poor conditions of disaster prevention and the high level of vulnerability that affect the country -especially the poorest- are rarely mentioned as factors that enhance the effects of destruction caused by nature. One of the activities most clearly connected with vulnerability to natural phenomena is deforestation and even protected areas continue being logged, thus increasing the problem.

The Rio Platano Reserve, situated in the northern atlantic region of the country, is a more than 800,000 hectare area, which was declared part of the World heritage by UNESCO in 1982. It is part of the Plapawas system which stretches from North to South, with the Tahwhka Biosphere Reserve, the Patuca National Park, and the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve -in neighbouring Nicaragua- forming the Central American Biological Corridor. A Parliamentary delegation that recently visited the Reserve verified that its Buffer Zone has been totally cut down as a consequence of the complete lack of control on the logging companies operating there. Even at the Core Zone of the Reserve, vast areas have been logged or burned. Wood is extracted by boat through the Wuampu and Patuca rivers. Cattle breeding activities and even the presence of an unauthorized landing strip were detected.

Direct agents of this destruction are wood dealers, but underlying actors are corrupted government officials who protect them. Loggers are often armed with heavy guns and menace local people, who are even forced to work for them. They also have connections with drug dealers and car robbers which operate in that area.

Even if the situation was denounced in Parliament in 1995 no steps have been taken to halt this destructive process. Additionally to corruption at the government officials level, the national Forestry Agency (COHDEFOR) continues to grant permits for logging in the Reserve without controlling the activities of the beneficiaries. Inspections undertaken by the Ministry of the Environment are rare and have proved ineffective. The above mentioned Parliamentary commission has suggested a number of steps to be taken urgently in order to avoid further damage.

Sources: Boletín SICA AL No 67, 30/8/99; Via Campesina, e-mail: viacam@gbm.hn, 16/9/99; Monti Aguirre, e-mail: monti@irn.org, 24/9/99.