Mexico: support needed to release anti-logging campesino leader

On May 2, 1999, Rodolfo Montiel Flores, the Mexican campesino who has been successfully leading public opposition in the Pacific Coast state of Guerrero against destructive logging operations by Boise Cascade -one of the world's largest timber corporations- was arrested by federal soldiers who violently entered the village of Pizotla. During this armed action also another campesino, Teodoro Cabrera Garcia, was arrested and Salome Sanchez Ortiz was shot dead. Military officials characterized both of them as "members of an ecologist-guerrilla organization". Since his detention, Montiel has been psycologically and physically tortured and also been denied adequate medical treatment, food, and water, as well as communications. The soldiers have threatened them with death and with reprisals to their families if they did not declare themselves guilty of the crimes of carrying illegal firearms, growing marijuana and of having links with the armed opposition group, the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR).

The Sierra of Petatlan in the state of Guerrero, with mountains reaching nearly 10,000 feet above sea level, contains some of North America's few remaining large tracts of relatively undisturbed forest. Trees help capture rainwater and boost the water supply which farmers below rely on for irrigation. As trees are cut down, there is less water and farmers have trouble growing crops. In the mid-1990s Montiel and the local communities involved themselves in an ecological struggle to defend their natural resources, facing destructive logging practices in their communal lands ("ejidos"): the Organization of Campesinos and Ecologists of the Sierra de Petatlan was born. During 1997 they set up a toll booth to collect a kind of local tax from passing logging trucks. But the booth was quickly destroyed, and an increasing number of soldiers began patrolling the area. The activists began blockading roads, stopping trucks and confiscating the lumber. As a result of this successful resistance, last year Boise Cascade decided to leave Guerrero. Some company officials have tried to ignore the relevant role of organized society and said in a statement that they left Guerrero because of "an inconsistent and seasonal wood supply from log suppliers". It is worrying that more than one year after suspending operations, Boise Cascade's continuing role in Guerrero is still unclear. As a matter of fact some of the company's contractors tried to restart logging operations after Montiel was arrested, but local community pressure has so far stopped them.

Boise Cascade's sad performance is very well known, not only in Mexico but also the United States and in Chile, where the company tried to implement a project that would mean the destruction of some of the world's few remaining native coastal temperate rainforest to feed the world's largest chip mill. The strong resistance of environmental NGOs together with several environmental lawsuits and a heavy fine for destroying archaeological remains has complicated and delayed Boise Cascade's plans in that country.

This is one more case of a long list of abuses by Northern logging, plantations, mining, and oil companies wishing to occupy the territory and exploit the natural resources of the South -often with the implicit or explicit support of local and national governments- regardless of any environmental or social negative impacts. Luckily this list also includes the brave resistance of many people in the field -some of them as famous as Chico Mendes and Ken Saro Wiwa, others anonymous women and men that love their land and want to defend it- and the solidarity of many others supporting their struggle in

different parts of the world.

The Human Rights Centre Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez A.C. has taken on the legal defence of the two activists under arrest in a legal process that is expected to be long and full of traps. At the same time human rights, farmers and environmental organizations worldwide -among them the WRM- have joined in a letter-writing campaign denouncing this case of human rights violation and demanding their immediate release. Information about this is included in our web page. Those interested in receiving additional information and/or in endorsing the letter, please contact: Pat Rasmussen.

Sources: Alejandro Villamar, 26/8/99, "Jailed timber-cutting foe seen as guerrilla by Mexico officials", Tracey Eaton, The Dallas Morning News, 27/8/99, sent by Victor Menotti.