
Mexico: opposition to deforestation in Chihuahua

The community of Ejido Pino Gordo, in the State of Chihuahua, formed by Tarahuamaras (or Raramuris, as they call themselves) indigenous peoples, is struggling against illegal logging that is destroying the 200-year old forests that surround their village in the Sierra Madre, about 850 miles northwest of Mexico City.

Members of the community expressed their demands to the State authorities in Chihuahua. "We don't want our forests felled" said Francisco Ramos, a Raramuri-speaking Indian leader. "We didn't plant the trees; God did, to collect water from the rain and give homes to the animals. The trees are not our property. We're just taking care of them", he added.

Pino Gordo lies next to another village called Coloradas de los Chavez, inhabited by Spanish-speaking people. Forestry laws passed in recent years encourage ejido communities -traditionally associated with the conservation of woodlands- to divide forests into plots and to sign timber-harvesting deals with companies. So last year the federal government issued a permit allowing this community to sign contracts with a logging consortium, even if such forests are the habitat of endangered fauna species. Additionally, the loggers invaded Pino Gordo's community territory and felled trees there. The logging enterprise in the area involves a regional contractor based in Parral and a strong statewide cartel which influences state and federal agencies.

Opposition from the Raramuris resulted in them receiving death threats. In April 1999 they staged a protest in front of the government's offices in the capital city of the State, but their complaint to the authorities did not get any serious response. An official of the Ministry of the Environment said that if Mexico were to restrict the cutting of forests for environmental reasons, they would risk being in the same situation of the USA, where most forest lands are now off limits to logging. This would not be realistic, since Mexico is not a developed country and needs "greater flexibility" in the management of its forests. Such point of view justifies the destruction of forests in the name of "development", and also ignores that this kind of exploitation does not result in the peoples' benefit but in that of a few companies. Environmental and social sustainability sound as odd words to this approach.

The case of Pino Gordo reveals a long history of attempts to deprive the community of their lands and forests, which involve several official institutions, as well as the neighbouring non-indigenous community led by mestizos, and a regional logging cartel. Environmental authorities have refused to acknowledge Raramuris' claims of illegal logging within ejido (communitary) lands since December 1998. Agrarian agencies have refused to rule on the Raramuris' protests, although they recognize a fraudulent ejido registry submitted in 1995 by Raul Aguirre, a local leader backed by logging interests.

As a response to the Raramuris' peaceful protest in April 1999 for the recognition of their agrarian rights and an immediate halt to logging in the disputed territory, the government temporarily halted logging in their lands, but the logging permit was not revoked. Other actions such as incompetent investigation of environmental damage claims filed in August 1998 and secrecy on logging permits made to Coloradas de los Chavez were also denounced.

