Venezuela: sign-on letter to President on Smurfit

On April 8th, the WRM sent the following letter to Venezuela's new President Hugo Chavez. Our Venezuelan friends request your support by adding your signature to the letter, which will be resent to the President followed by the signatures of all those who are willing to support it. Please include name, organization and country and send that data to: wrm@chasque.apc.org

LETTER TO PRESIDENT CHAVEZ (translation of Spanish original)

We would like to express our concern regarding an issue which we consider to be extremely important, while at the same time we request you to personally intervene to find a solution to a conflict in the State of Portuguesa.

For a long time, peasants from that State and specifically those from the villages of Morador and Tierra Buena have been in conflict with Smurfit Carton of Venezuela, a subsidiary of the Ireland-based transnational Jefferson Smurfit.

Among the multiple problems generated by this corporation in that region, the more apparent are those related to the impacts of its extensive monoculture tree plantations on water, flora and wildlife, which result in serious problems for local peoples' livelihoods. Moreover, there is ample evidence that the company has been deforesting, both directly or though third party agents, the few remaining forests of this Venezuelan State, with the aim of supplying raw material to its pulp plant located in Yaracuy State (MOCARPEL). As a last resort to put a stop to this predatory activity, a group of over a hundred people blockaded a national highway in January this year to denounce this fact and the National Guard thereby detained a dozen of trucks loaded with tropical wood which were on their way to Smurfit's industrial plant.

Even worse, the company is implementing plantations in clear violation of the legal regulations, because the authorization to occupy the territory provided to Smurfit by the Ministry of the Environment is illegal, given that it allows afforestation in areas of clear agricultural land use, thus violating the State of Portuguesa's Territorial Management Plan. In addition, the authorization was issued by government officials with no authority over the matter. Additionally, there is also a violation of the constitutional precept which bans the existence of large estates, given that the corporation currently owns 34,000 hectares of land in the States of Portuguesa, Lara and Cojedes. The purchase of the estate "La Portuguesa" (2,700 hectares) by Smurfit resulted in its peaceful occupation by local peasants on July 14 1997, with the aim of obtaining from the government the allocation of the land which they require for their survival. However, the response was a brutal repression from the National Guard and many of the consequences are still being suffered by those who participated in the action.

All the above and much more has been duly investigated and documented by the Environment Committee of the Venezuelan Senate. In spite of this, a solution seems impossible, because the company and local people are in a situation of confrontation, while the State Government and the National Guard of Portuguesa seem to have taken a position in favour of the company, without taking into account the needs and rights of peasants or the environmental impacts of the company's

activities. Consequently, if a solution is to be found, it appears to be necessary that the peasants' desire to be allocated land in "La Productora" estate is fulfilled --which we believe to be in accordance with the advanced agrarian legislation of Venezuela-- and that the aggressions to the environment resulting from the activities of this company be halted.

On the other hand, we feel that it is relevant to highlight that this problem is a consequence --common in many Southern countries-- of the large scale tree plantation model, which is everywhere creating problems similar to those which have occurred in the State of Portuguesa, as well as similar confrontational situations.

In accordance with the above, we are confident that the government which you preside will take matters into its hands and will be able to revert a situation which, in case of continuing in its current course, will only lead to confrontations which will benefit no-one.

We look forward to hearing from you.
Yours sincerely,