
Venezuela: Smurfit's changing strategy

After years facing strong opposition from local communities resulting from the social and environmental impacts of its activities in the State of Portuguesa, Smurfit Carton is now trying to profit from the recent political changes in Venezuela. Strange as it might seem this company, which short time ago was a declared enemy of today's President Hugo Chavez, is trying to use the "Plan Bolívar 2000", a social initiative launched by the new government, with the aim of weakening the peasants' organization and opposition to its monoculture tree plantations.

Through "Plan Bolívar 2000" the government is using military contingents in community work in poor neighbourhoods and rural communities to assist them in the sanitary and infrastructure fields. Smurfit, that in 1997 and 1998 opposed Chavez and its political movement and even developed espionage activities on him, is now sponsoring the government's assistance plan. The implementation of such plan started on February 27th in Morador. Smurfit has donated medicines and is involved in the reparation of the local school as a way of showing a new image of the company to the community. Peasants and environmental organizations have warned that this is not but a new misleading strategy of the company, which is highly interested in eliminating social unrest in the area only to continue with business as usual. The serious economic situation that Venezuela is facing is a threat to the company's expectations regarding high revenues. It seems difficult that this year's economic results for Smurfit will be as good as in 1997 and 1998, though not only because of recession but also due to the fact that strong opposition from local communities, has forced the company to halt its deforestation activities and therefore has limited its access to cheap raw material from tropical forests.

The communities of Morador and Tierra Buena have obtained national and international support to their struggle. In the neighbouring cities of Guanare, Acarigua and Ospino, graffiti have appeared claiming that lands are granted to the peasants and that deforestation and plantations by Smurfit are definitively halted. Responding to the request of local communities and organizations, the WRM has started an international campaign to call President Chavez's attention on this problematic situation (see sign-on letter in this issue).

Our readers are kindly asked to address the Venezuelan Embassy in their respective countries expressing their support to Morador and Tierra Buena communities' demands and enclosing a reprint of the two relevant articles published in this issue of WRM Bulletin.

Sources: Asociación Civil Comisión de Arborización, Grupo Ecológico Tacamajaca, Grupo Ecológico Morador, Comité de Tierras de Morador y Tierra Buena, Junta para la Conservación, Defensa y Mejoramiento del Ambiente del Municipio Ospino, 16/4/99.