
Chile: the forestry model in big trouble

The Chilean forestry model has been publicized as an example of modern forestry development and has been exported as such to the countries of the region. However, such forestry development style, implemented during the military dictatorship and resulting in economic concentration, the displacement of thousands of peasants and indigenous people and negative environmental impacts is now being severely challenged --through direct actions-- by those affected. In this case, by the Mapuche indigenous peoples.

During February and March, the south of Chile witnessed a number of confrontations resulting from the Mapuche's struggle for the recognition of their territorial rights. With the exception of the metropolitan area of the country's capital city Santiago, this is where the majority of this indigenous nation lives, totalling a million people.

In order to make effective their ancestral but systematically ignored rights, 300 Mapuche from the communities of Temulemu, Didaico and Pantano, together with others from Lumaco decided to take direct action and on March 5th they attacked the Chorrillos estate, located to the southwest of Traiguén. Their aim was to put a stop to the cutting of pines from a plantation which the enterprise Forestal Mininco considers to be its own. The Agrarian Reform implemented by former President Eduardo Frei Montalva --the current President's father-- recognized the ownership of the Mapuche communities over those lands. Pinochet's military dictatorship later confiscated those lands, which were put on sale and purchased by this enterprise.

While the police defended the estate, a numerous group of Mapuche --which included men, women and children-- attacked with traditional weapons and firearms, crying out slogans such as "They are few (the police) and they fight for money; we are many and we fight for life." Fourteen people resulted injured in the struggle and a tense atmosphere settled since then in the area. The indigenous people gave Mininco an ultimatum to definitely stop its activities.

While this struggle was taking place, the same enterprise was cutting trees in another sector of the same municipality, and the felling restarted on the following day. In a provocative attitude, the felling was carried out at short distance from the house of Mapuche chief Pascual Pichun, in Santa Rosa de Colpi. Mapuche leaders claim that the company's attitude makes a mockery of the judicial system, given that there has yet not been a decision on the matter. In consequence, further mobilizations can be expected.

A week later, in the Province of Arauco, a group of one hundred people, members of some 30 Mapuche families from several communities within the Lautaro-Antiquina area, occupied an estate where Forestal Bosques Arauco operated. Juan Huenupi, council member of the National Corporation of Indigenous Development (CONADI), stated that "the people are tired and justice is not made." He said that the indigenous people that took part in this action claim 50,000 hectares of land that had been recognized as being theirs by the Agrarian Reform and that had been later taken away from them by the military dictatorship. After occupying the estate for a whole day, the Mapuche withdrew in wait for their demands to be taken at last into account.

On March 13th, in the nearby area of Canete, a group of Mapuche took the Lleu-Lleu estate by assault. The action took place after a Mapuche meeting (nguillatun) was held, with the participation of members of several communities of Arauco Province (8th Region) as well as from communities from the 9th Region. Osvaldo Carvajal, the current owner of the estate, considers himself as being unfairly involved in a historical conflict between the Mapuche and the Chilean state and initiated legal action against the assailants. On the following day, the police arrested Mapuche film-maker Jeannette Paillan --from the Mapuche Study and Communication Centre Lulul Mawidha-- while she was filming a nguillatun. They claimed that she had participated in the previous day's assault and presented charges of robbery and looting of private property. However, her detention is in fact part of a number of intimidatory and violent actions suffered by the Lulul Mawidha Centre, carried out by civil and paramilitary groups from the forestry companies operating in the area. Other indigenous people were detained following the assault of Lleu-Lleu. On March 20th, four of them were released for lack of evidence, while three remain in custody waiting to be tried. Maria Llanquileo, spokesperson of the Mapuche Coordination of Arauco, announced that on that same day all the communities of the province would demonstrate in support of those arrested and that other organizations from the rest of the country would also participate.

The violence prevailing in the region originates from a situation of injustice, where the forestry enterprises, with the unrestricted support of the state, appropriated the land of the original peoples. In such situation, the Mapuche aim at generating political spaces trying to tip the balance in their favour in the struggle for the recognition of their territorial rights.

The Mapuche are among the most neglected sectors within Chilean society and they are confronting a very serious situation as a result of the loss of their territories and natural resources to what they call the "Chilean usurpers": the powerful forestry companies. Dispossessed of the material base of their existence, their culture is threatened. According to Jacques Chonchol, ex-Minister of Agriculture of President Allende's government (overthrown by Pinochet's coup), the dictatorship holds the "main responsibility" over the current conflict, given that it "implemented a counter agrarian reform and the 300,000 hectares that had been returned to the communities as a historical reparation, were taken away from them and auctioned in fraudulent operations where the forestry companies bought them at very low prices." In this way, the forestry companies "have monopolized lands and have even forested in agricultural soils, which implies a crime against the country." The forestry model imposed by the military dictatorship resulted in the concentration of land, production means, management and decision-making in the hands of a small group of corporations which dominate the sector's production chain. Forestal Arauco is precisely one example of this. On the other hand, it is well known that radiata pine and eucalyptus plantations have been one of the main factors in the destruction of Southern Chile's temperate forests.

The companies which have generated the social and environmental damages have maintained a tough attitude regarding the Mapuche's demands. Forestal Mininco, a subsidiary of the transnational corporation Compania Manufacturera de Papeles y Cartones (CMPC), with support from CORMA (Chilean Wood Industry Corporation), qualified the action of the Mapuche in the Chorrillos estate as "rural terrorism." Andres Ovalle, the company's manager, claims those lands are "not productive as agricultural lands and are only fit for tree plantations." Felipe Lamarca, spokesperson of SOFOFA (Industrial Development Society) considers that "the government must fully support private investors regarding their rights to own and administer their resources and avoid putting forward proposals which limit such rights", while at the same time declaring his alarm over the indigenous peoples' mobilization, led by a new generation of leaders, and having national and international links with environmental and indigenous peoples' movements. He proposes that the Mapuche abandon their territory or that they are directly transported to the city, but assisted by "state integration policies so

that they don't join the ranks of marginality."

Far from playing the role it should regarding the defense of the cultural and territorial rights of the native inhabitants of southern Chile, the Chilean state's actions have been geared in favour of forestry enterprises. Mario Rios Santander, Vice-President of the Senate, says that "the government has not provided resources aimed at the indigenous peoples issue." The Minister of National Resources, Adriana Delpiano, admits that the government does not have land to give to the Mapuche of the 9th Region. The government has been constantly dubious regarding whether to try to dialogue or to resort to repression. The actions of the National Corporation of Indigenous Development, conditioned by an insufficient budget, have been ineffective, both in the area of conflict conciliation and in that regarding the satisfaction of the demands of the affected indigenous peoples.

At the root of this conflict there are two clearly opposed visions. On the one hand, the neo-liberal approach, where the state encourages the prominence of the private sector, which in turn has been voraciously consuming native forests, using its wood to feed the pulp and paper industry and replacing them by tree monocultures aimed at the same use. To large corporations, the Mapuche only mean an inconvenience and what should be done is to take them away. On the other hand, there is the vision of the native peoples, strongly defending their land, means of subsistence and culture. The issue is not --as some media has tried to ridicule-- to turn back 300 years of history, but to recognize the rights of the indigenous peoples to their territory, their culture and their integrity, in accordance with the tendency in the legislation of many Latin American countries. This would be the way to halt the prevailing situation of violence in the region. It would also serve as a means to stop a forestry development style which benefits a few and is detrimental not only to the Mapuche but also to the Chilean people as a whole. That is, in essence, the famous and promoted "Chilean forestry model" which is intended to be imposed all across Latin America.

Sources: Dario Jana 6/3/99, 10/3/99, 12/3/99; Jorge Calbucura 10/3/99, 11/3/99, 18/3/99, 20/3/99; MAPULINK 13/3/99; Monti Aguirre, IRN, 15/3/99; Defensores del Bosque Chileno, "La tragedia del bosque chileno", 1998. Comments: WRM.