Guatemala: Maya Biosphere Reserve under threat

Carmelita and Uaxactun are two communities who for over 80 years have been living within the boundaries of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala (created in 1989), which is currently menaced by oil concessions. The Reserve involves an area of 16,000 sq.km, and constitutes the largest protected tropical forest in the country. Both communities have traditionally lived on the extraction of “xate” (Chamaedorea spp.), the exploitation of "chicle" (chewing gum, Manilkara achras) and the commercial use of pepper (Pimenta dioica), having established a sustainable use pattern of the resources. Last year, President Alvaro Arzu even officially congratulated them for the sustainable use of the territory and resources of the Reserve performed by them, with the support of AFOCOP (Forest Cooperatives Association) . However, in 1997 the government itself put out to tender for oil exploitation an area of 300,000 hectares belonging to the Reserve and coinciding with the portion of forest traditionally used by the above named communities. Two years before, Carmelita had got a permission from the National Council for Protected Areas of Guatemala to use this territory, and Uaxactum is undergoing a similar process.

The communities were never informed nor consulted on this plan. As soon as they learnt about it, and with support from Oilwatch, they started an international campaign to stop the oil exploitation project that will negatively affect their livelihoods and culture. More than 300 organizations and individuals worldwide –among them the WRM International Secretariat- joined the initiative by means of a message addressed to the Guatemalan President.

To make matters worse, the government situated military personnel in six “border posts” in the heart of the Reserve. Such decision has been strongly resisted by the local people, that consider this as a menace to their integrity and a token of the Government’s attitude to protect the interests of oil companies, as has been happening in other places such as Laguna del Tigre and La Libertad.

Last February, 32 leaders representing traditional Peten communities -including Uaxactun and Carmelita and AFOCOP- issued a declaration to the Guatemalan Government and civil society and to the international public where they explain the situation they are facing and invite to reflect upon it. They also express their justified disagreement with the oil concessions: “We want to express our disagreement with President Arzu’s decision to grant petroleum concessions in the protected area of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. As people from Peten, we feel this decision is disastrous and that the damage that will occur to the ecosystems has not been taken into account. We denounce the illegality of permitting this activity in a protected area and we feel devastated by the decision to permit the destruction of the social, environmental, cultural and political balance”.

The document also denounces pollution and destruction of flora and fauna provoked by petroleum exploitation in tropical forests. “Article 94 of the Constitution states that the Government has an obligation to the health of its citizens, and Article 97 requires the participation of all, to propose social, economic and technological development that prevent contamination and maintain an ecological balance. Petroleum exploitation in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, named one of the most important lungs of the world, implies a clear risk of violating these constitutional obligations of all Guatemalans and more importantly of the Government”.

The declaration also demonstrates that even from a mere economic point of view oil exploitation is not a profitable activity if compared to traditional land use and tourism; not the mention the impacts on people. In sum: “The rational and sustainable use of natural resources offers, with very rough numbers, more than $10 million, benefiting more than 60,000 people. In 1994, the Minister of Energy and Mines reported receiving $1 million from petroleum activities, benefiting one thousand people.”

The signatories conclude that “it is NOT acceptable to permit the incursion of any more petroleum companies into the Maya Biosphere Reserve. We, as workers of the land, love the Peten and will do all in our power to protect it. If or when this threat becomes a reality, we will use all legal means to prevent it. We emphatically demand that our right to Constitutional Petitions and Defense be respected”.

The complete text of the Declaration is available at: Oilwatch Mesoamerica.

Sources: Oilwatch Mesoamerica 8/2/99, 5/3/88, 8/3/99.