
Argentina: battle over gas pipeline in the long struggle of the Kolla peoples

-

The Kolla indigenous people, that live in the northern Argentinian Provinces of Jujuy and Salta, have been defending the “yungas” -one of the last remaining mountain forests in Argentina- against a pipeline project that would transport natural gas from eastern Salta to the northern Chilean copper mines. In April 1998 ENARGAS –the Argentinian regulatory entity- approved the project presented by Consorcio Norandino SA, according to which the pipeline would cross Finca San Andres, inhabited by 350 Kolla families, who oppose it.

Last June a Federal judge ordered the suspension of the pipeline construction, considering that the project lacked an adequate environmental impact assessment, as well as of any social and cultural impact evaluation, ignoring the existence of the Kollas in the area.

But supporters of the gas pipeline are powerful and influential: The Salta Provincial Government gained the support of the population of the nearby town of Oran, because of the jobs that Techint -the company in charge of building the pipeline- had promised to create; Güemes Radio has even instigated violence against the Kolla; many Argentinian judges have strong links with the government and are suspected of corruption. In July the Federal Court of Appeal revoked the Federal judge's decision and authorized the project. One week later the heavy machinery of Techint was opening a 12 metre wide trail in Finca San Andres, destroying the yunga and threatening Kolla cemeteries and archeological sites. Affected Kollas' protests got the original project route diverted a couple of metres to avoid further destruction. Nevertheless it is also feared that the removal of sectors of the mountain will provoke landslides. During floods, rock materials transported by the San Andres River could damage the pipeline itself, provoking gas escapes.

During the opening of the recently celebrated XI Global Biodiversity Forum (see article in this issue and in Bulletin 17) the Secretary for the Environment and Natural Resources Maria Julia Alsogaray stated that during the present administration the protected area of the yungas had been increased to 300,000 hectares. Her declarations are in total contradiction with what is actually happening on the ground.

The battle over the San Andres pipeline seems to have been lost. However, the struggle continues. “The Government has everything on his side: judges, politicians, mass media. But they have forgotten that we have fought for 500 years to recover our lands and natural resources. For the non pollution of the water, the air, the soil. For our cultural values and cosmovision. In sum, for our existence as human beings in harmony with the surrounding nature” stated Festo Chausque, one of the Kolla leaders.

Sources: Glenn Switkes, Latin America Program, International Rivers Network, December 1998; Festo Chausque, Centro Indigena Kolla de Salta, 14/12/1998.

