
Venezuela: forests menaced...plantations promoted

In WRM Bulletin nr 14 (August 1998) we informed about the blockade of the highway Venezuela-Brazil by a group of indigenous peoples of the Imataca and Gran Sabana regions to stop a high voltage electrical transmission line (Macagua II-Santa Elena de Uairen), that is being built through the Imataca Forest Reserve. This is a particularly rich in biodiversity and vulnerable area, menaced by mining projects promoted by the controversial Decree 1850, which was highly resisted by indigenous communities, environmental NGOs and academics (see WRM Bulletin nr 12).

In spite of their efforts to have their rights over their ancestral territories recognized by the subsequent governments, the indigenous communities of this country have always been ignored and deceived and their wish that Venezuelan society becomes a multicultural and multiethnic one, is still far from being achieved. According to local organizations, Venezuelan legislation is even less progressive than that of other Latin American countries to this regard.

A group of representatives of the indigenous communities of Imataca, Gran Sabana and Paragua sent a letter dated October 3rd to the Brazilian Ambassador in Caracas, denouncing to the Brazilian people and authorities the terms of the Guzmania Protocol –signed by Brazil and Venezuela in 1994- that promotes mining, tourism and forestry in Imataca and Gran Sabana, ignoring the ancestral rights of indigenous peoples over these lands and inducing negative environmental consequences. They expressed that the Guzmania Protocol violates Article 77 of the Venezuelan Constitution, where an exception regime for indigenous peoples is recognized to guarantee their territorial rights.

Continuing their actions, on October 22nd a group of indigenous leaders, representatives of several indigenous peoples of Imataca and Gran Sabana regions, addressed the Supreme Court of Justice, demanding the total suspension of the construction of the transmission line, since it will negatively affect the environment, their livelihoods and culture. They claim that while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights –whose 50th anniversary is celebrated in 1998- establishes that every people has the right to create and enjoy its own culture, and that the Venezuelan Constitution guarantees an exception regime for indigenous peoples territories, they are actually plunged into material and spiritual poverty. Land tenure is at the centre of the problem. Indigenous peoples' ancestral territorial rights and their communal property regime are not recognized. Meanwhile their territories are sold out to transnational companies, squandering the national heritage. There are many examples of this depredation, besides that of Imataca: the indigenous territories of the Amacuro Delta, Monagas and Anzoategui have been occupied by oil companies, and the Bari and Yukpa of Zulia Estate are facing coal exploitation in their traditional lands.

Unwilling to protect the forests and the people that make a sustainable use of them, the Venezuelan State is actively promoting tree plantations under the usual scheme. The so-called National Programme for the Development of Forest Resources establishes a zonification for plantations in soils considered marginal for other activities. Putting to side the issue of the adequacy or not of such zonification (zones considered as marginal by the state are usually considered very useful by local people), the fact is that there are cases where the law has been ignored and tree plantations have been established in lands considered apt for agriculture and cattle raising. A paradigmatic example is

that of the transnational company Smurfit -established in 27 countries all over four continents- which has occupied fertile peasants' lands in Portuguesa State with pine, eucalyptus and gmelina monocultures, forcing their displacement.

Unfortunately, the Venezuelan case is not an exception in Latin America: repression to those who protect the forests and benefits to those who destroy them.

Sources: Alfredo Torres (pers.comm.); AMIGRANSA, 7/11/98; "Contra los pinos, eucaliptos y melinas de Smurfit", Ecologia Politica, 14, 1997.