
Venezuela: highway blockade against electric transmission line

Indigenous peoples of the Imataca and Gran Sabana regions began a blockade of the only highway between Venezuela and Brazil, to protest against a high voltage electrical transmission line being built through the Imataca Forest Reserve. The indigenous peoples are demanding that the Venezuelan government legally recognize and respect the boundaries of their ancestral lands. Their action is taking place in the context of a number of demonstrations all over the country related to the 500-year anniversary of the arrival of Columbus to Venezuela. The government's policy in relation to Imataca had already been resisted by indigenous and environmental organizations of Venezuela (see WRM Bulletin nr. 12).

At a press conference held in August 7, 16 indigenous leaders coming from the Sierra Imataca, the Gran Sabana and the Caroni and Paragua watersheds declared that they had tried by all means and unsuccessfully to have their territories recognized by the consecutive Venezuelan governments. They consider that the building of the electrical transmission line is in violation of their rights, since they were not consulted or even informed. They said that they had decided the closure of the highway as a response to the government's inaction to their demands and that this was their opportunity to inform the community about the issue.

Work on the transmission line began in October, and local populations had not been informed about it. No social evaluation had been carried out and the existing environmental assessment is not adequate and its findings don't provide real solutions to the problem.

EDELCA is the firm in charge of the work, while the construction contract is held by the transnational corporation Asea Brown Boveri, which subcontracted the Venezuelan company Vincler for the construction of the sub-station. Wood extraction is in charge of the companies COVEMAT and SVECA

The government agency responsible for the permits is the Ministry of the Environment, but the Minister has never provided the communities with information about the project. The main promoter of the project is the Minister of Frontiers, Pompeyo Marquez, who has repeatedly told the press that the project will be implemented, regardless of the opposition it might receive. The project will not benefit any of the communities through which it will pass, with the exception of Santa Elena de Uaién and the mining companies operating in the Imataca Forest Reserve.

Apparently there are some hidden negotiations linked to the power line, particularly in relation with mining and logging companies, but EDELCA has not been willing to provide any information and only declares that the aim is to benefit the village of Santa Elena and to sell electricity to Brazil.

Deforestation related to the project is high. Contrary to what the public has been informed, the power line is not being built along the existing main highway of the Conaima National Park. Openings are being cut in the forest of some 30-40 metres of width and 800 metres long. This work has included the destruction of communities' crops, while also water, soil and ecosystems have been affected. Places where indigenous communities used to take water from have been closed with logs and

heaps of soil.

A number of constitutional, legal and international agreements favourable to indigenous peoples rights have been violated to implement this project. This leads to the conclusion expressed in the press conference by the indigenous peoples representatives: "Development is for others and makes us more dependent. There is no real development plan, neither for Venezuela nor for the frontier and whoever says the contrary is lying." In consequence, they have decided "to maintain indefinitely the peaceful occupation of the national and international highway Venezuela-Brazil until our demands are satisfied."

Source: Leobardo Acurero,