
Roraima fires: more than meets the eye

We have received the following contribution from Leonardo Acurero, through our Venezuelan friends from AMIGRANSA, related to the actors behind the scenes involved in the recent fires that devastated the Brazilian state of Roraima . A providential rain has extinguished it but the danger of future fires is still looming.

“The fire of development and occupation covers Roraima.

The enormous fires affecting the state of Roraima -at the border between Brazil and Venezuela- has NOT been caused by an abnormal drought. The whole territory of this state is located in a geographical region whose precipitation period is similar to that of Venezuela and its mesoclimatic conditions correspond to those of Northern South America. At this time of year this is considered a high pressure area with absence of rains.

The landscape of Boa Vista -North and South of the capital of Roraima- is occupied by a mixed tropical premontane forest, transitional to the tropical forest of the Southern and Western region of the state. This means that there is a quick loss of humidity, which favours the action of fire. In addition, a big portion of this area has been suffering frequent fires during the last years; the savanna area has expanded and nowadays occupies a surface 5-times that of the forest, limited to small and dispersed units all over the region.

Two main activities promote every year these terrible fires: cattle raising and mining. Such type of fires are not only a frequent feature in today's Roraima; they have also taken place in the past: enormous areas were set on fire to clear land for colonization. The dark mist that covered our Venezuelan atmosphere in mid-May 1995, were first perceived in Puerto Ordaz and in Ciudad Bolívar, and later in the Northern cities of Caracas, Valencia and Barquisimeto. When rains were expected to come, winds that usually bring humidity from the tropical forest of Southern Venezuela only brought particles of carbon in suspension originated in a big forest fire that happened at that time in the Brazilian territory. The frequent occurrence of such fires is the reason which explains why the international press was only informed about this one two months after it had started.

Roraima is a Brazilian state targeted by a colonization process promoted by the Brazilian Government under the influence of the military. This project is causing the immigration of hundreds of entire families coming from the dry and poor region of the “Nordeste” (Northeastern region), who are also occupying indigenous lands. Mining is the main activity promoting this anti-environmental and destructive exodus. As a matter of fact, Boa Vista was founded as a result of the mining expansion, that during 20 years has stimulated the invasion of Yanomani territories and the genocide of this nation in this part of the Brazilian territory.

The Brazilian Government has been severely criticized for its determination to occupy the Roraima territory at any price, even without taking into account the destruction of the forest and that of the indigenous communities. The criticism is based upon the evidence of the impacts that are destroying the forest, as shown by recent satellite images.

This is a clear example of the incompatibility of this terrible development model which is being imposed upon this fragile South American tropical rainforest ecosystem, unique on Earth. Nevertheless the military members of the National Security Council presided by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso himself, categorically opposed the participation of technical staff of the United Nations in helping to combat the fire, that has already affected 20% of this Brazilian state (about 43,000 square kilometres).

Trying to occupy Roraima has been a hard task for the Brazilian government, since these territories are situated far away from the industrialized southeastern centres. In spite of this, the Venezuelan Government is supporting and financing the occupation of Roraima, through a complete plan, that includes providing electric energy, fuel, building materials and even the asphaltting of highway nr. 174, that links Boa Vista and Manaus.

Our -Venezuelan- foreign policy is not only definitively blind but also will have a boomerang effect. It will possibly be too late -once the destruction of the Amazon is completed and an enormous invasion from Brazil arrives- when we realize that we ourselves have contributed to the destruction of our nation."

Source: Leonardo Acurero, April 1998