
Nicaragua: indigenous communities win battle against Korean logging company

A large meeting took place last February in Rosita, a village on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, attended by representatives of indigenous communities (Sumus and Miskitos), local and regional authorities, NGOs, community and religious leaders and many others. The reason: the illegal activities of the Korean transnational company Kimyung, which received a concession in 1994 from the Nicaraguan central government -at the time headed by President Violeta Chamorro- to log an area of 62,000 hectares of forest in indigenous territories. Kimyung operates through the subsidiary SOLCARSA (Sol del Caribe: Sun of the Caribbean), and its objective is to produce plywood from the region's broadleaf forests.

This concession -the largest ever given by the Nicaraguan government to a foreign firm- was awarded in violation of the constitution, which requires that any concession must be approved by the relevant Regional Autonomous Council, and Chamorro's government did not comply with this requirement. However, the company began its logging and plywood production activities, which immediately resulted in a number of problems to local communities, both to those who thought they would benefit from SOLCARSA's presence -particularly through job-creation- and to those who opposed it.

As thousands of trees were felled and people realized that the jobs created were few and badly paid and that the company did not comply with its initial promises, opposition grew. People resorted to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the concession was unconstitutional and had to be revoked. A year later, with more pressure against the government's manoeuvring, the ruling was upheld and the concession was annulled.

The problems are not however over. Although the Korean firm does not hold that concession any longer, it is now trying to obtain wood for its plywood factory from local loggers. Local communities and their allies therefore organized a Forum of the Atlantic North in Rosita, where they discussed the problem and issued a 14-point declaration, which included:

- To demand the Regional Autonomous Council to suspend authorization of concessions until the relevant authorities demarcate and award land titles to the indigenous territories
- To promote the speedy exit of SOLCARSA from the territory
- To demand the central government not to award concessions in communal lands, because these belong to the indigenous communities and not to the State.

These demands are crucial. As Maria Luisa Acosta -lawyer of one of the affected communities- says: "SOLCARSA no longer holds the concession and therefore the threat of expropriation of the land to be given to foreigners has vanished. How long will this last? The threat will continue to hang over the communities until the land is demarcated and the State recognizes the rights of the communities over their land." She added: "According to the law, SOLCARSA can continue buying logs. It is therefore

necessary that indigenous communities stay alert -the same as the authorities and civil society- to ensure that our rights are respected.”

Although the meeting recognized the need to “promote productive activities in the region which diversity the use of natural resources in favour of local communities”, the fact is that the central government is viewed by the local people as only interested in collecting taxes from foreign investors. As regards to forests, such view is the opposite of the indigenous communities, which see forests under a totally different perspective. As Sumu leader Charles McKlean says: “To affect the life of our trees is as if we affect our own life. When we affect the forest, we affect everyone’s life . . . If we cut down the trees there will be no more water, nor food, nor fish or animals such as the boar.” In the same way Julio Bucardo, a Miskito leader states: “We, the Miskitos, have even gone without eating in order to preserve our forests.”

Source: “Monitoreo Ambiental” February 1998; “Foro sobre Concesiones , Caso SOLCARSA, Rosita, February 1998