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## Fires and agribusiness: deforestation drivers in the Bolivian Amazon

Eleven percent of the Amazon is in Bolivia. Broadly defined, the Amazonian region of this country comprises the states of Beni and Pando, as well as the northern parts of Santa Cruz, La Paz and Cochabamba.

Deforestation in the Bolivian Amazon has been increasing significantly in recent years, mainly due to the expansion of agribusiness, infrastructure projects, mining, large-scale forest fires, and the creation of government policies that expedite the extractivist agenda.

On December 2, 2018, the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas (CONTIOCAP, by its Spanish acronym) was created by the determination of 12 peoples and organizations to resist extractivism. In a context that is increasingly adverse due to extractive policies being promoted in the country, CONTIOCAP's main objective is to join indigenous and peasant communities who have been defending their rights.

In its few years of existence, CONTIOCAP has positioned itself in the public eye as a benchmark for dignity and as a contributor to public debate; its actions have included analyzing the current situation, denouncing the growing violations of human and indigenous peoples' rights, and offering alternative proposals to extractivism.

In late 2023, WRM spoke with Ruth Alipaz, a native indigenous leader from the Uchupiamona Nation in the Bolivian Amazon, and member of CONTIOCAP, to reflect on the situation in this territory and the powerful resistance that Indigenous Peoples have been waging.

### **The business of burning**

An estimated three million hectares of forest in Bolivia were lost to forest fires in 2023. The fires have been aggravated by the drought that the country is going through: in 2023, there was a 17% reduction in rainfall compared to previous years. But this situation is not coincidental. Agribusiness companies, for the most part, are behind these fires. This constitutes a direct attack on territories and protected areas, which largely overlap with indigenous territories.

In order to expand the agricultural frontier, agribusiness entrepreneurs make indiscriminate use of *chaqueo*—the burning of certain areas to later use for agriculture—and in so doing, overstep the agricultural frontier. This is possible because the government does not have any serious mechanism to control these large agricultural corporations. In turn, these companies often benefit from the profits they produce on community lands, because the inhabitants are forced to rent the lands; they do not have sufficient resources to exploit the land for their own and their community's benefit. These entrepreneurs who illegally cross the agricultural frontier are sanctioned with the ridiculous fine of \$0.20 per hectare burned—which essentially means that there is an invitation to burn more than what is allowed and make huge profits doing so (1).

Ruth Alipaz explains to us how companies discovered the business of burning so that the forest loses

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value. “Setting fire to the forest is a cruel and low-cost way to deforest primary forests. It allows for a change of land use which then enables the establishment of monoculture plantations, for example,” she says.

Ruth tells us that “every year Bolivians breathe the smoke and ashes of our future, because they are stripping us of our livelihoods and our dignity. And this is not only happening to Indigenous Peoples. Our territory is what gives us our dignity; in our territory we are known and recognized because we are someone. We have dignity when we contribute our dreams to realize a project for our autonomy, making use of our culture and ancestral knowledge.”

In addition to the fires, deforestation in the Bolivian Amazon has been increasing at an accelerated pace.

## **Deforestation and agribusiness**

In 2022, the deforestation rate in the Bolivian Amazon was the second highest in the Amazon region—after Brazil—and the third highest globally in terms of hectares deforested. An estimated 270,000 hectares were cleared that year. According to Fundación Tierra, a Bolivian organization, in the five-year period from 2016-2021, deforestation increased by 73% compared to the period from 2010-2015. There are still no official figures from 2023, but specialists agree that the trend points to a continued increase in deforestation (2).

This massive increase in deforestation rates is largely the result of the expansion of industrial agribusiness to produce soybean and beef for export. According to Fundación Tierra, “the driver of this change is the expansion of the soybean model, whose driving force, in turn, is the consolidation of land ownership rights for large and medium-sized corporate properties. The forests have been cleared to make more land available for soybean, so much so that the soy sector is growing at a faster rate than other commercial sectors (corn, sorghum, wheat, sugar cane, rice). The titling of large forest areas as private property, and the mass issuing of land clearing permits, have laid the groundwork to swiftly put large fields into cultivation. The expansion of industrial agriculture is followed by livestock farming for export.” There are nearly 1.5 million hectares of soybean alone in Bolivia, being among the largest exporters in the world.

To provide an example: The department of Beni, which is located in the heart of the Amazon and is home to 18 of Bolivia's 36 Indigenous Peoples, is not exempt from these pressures. On the contrary, the governments that have been in office since 2016 have pushed to update the Land Use Plan (PLUS, by its Spanish acronym), and in 2019, there was a review and update of the PLUS for Beni. According to an academic study, this plan was carried out “under the premise of expanding the agricultural frontier and lifting the department out of poverty” (3). However, numerous indigenous organizations harshly criticized the process for not taking them into account or consulting them. They denounce that only the opinions of the business sectors were considered, particularly those of cattle ranchers, who have economic interests in expanding the agricultural-livestock frontier (4).

The new Plan PLUS Beni is, at the end of the day, a tool to enable the destruction of the Amazon, without considering the ways of life of the numerous Indigenous Peoples who have traditionally inhabited, and therefore conserved, these territories.

## **Oil palm for “biofuels”**

Another underlying cause of the fires, according to reports by activists and local organizations, is the

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promotion of crops to produce so-called 'biofuels.' Under the pretext of creating jobs and reducing fossil fuel dependence, the Bolivian government recently launched a series of measures to promote the planting and expansion of three new crops: oil palm, jathropa palm and macororó. These three new crops, which until now have not been widespread in Bolivia, are now added to the existing hectares of soybean, sugarcane, etc.

Oil palm is a crop that until recently was unknown in Bolivia. Through the so-called "Program to promote the cultivation of oil-rich plant species," the government has already established more than 18 nurseries that have the capacity to produce 48,000 seedlings. The program is focused on the Amazon region, since palm trees require high humidity to grow. The goal of the program is to have 60,000 hectares planted within five years (5).

According to statements made in the national media by Javier Mamani Quispe, coordinator of this program, "The program will not lead to deforestation, but rather will rehabilitate degraded soils." However, the experience with this crop in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America not only shows that industrial palm plantations are a cause of deforestation and contamination of soils and water sources, but that they also cause numerous impacts for the people who live in and around the territories occupied by these monocultures.

Will the thousands of hectares of burned primary forests be declared degraded lands, and therefore viable to be used for palm plantations?

The expansion of oil palm is tied to the violation of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities, as well as to the impacts on their livelihoods and cultures. Numerous land rights conflicts have been documented. With the expansion of this industry, women and girls—including women who work on the plantations—suffer the most profound injustices and inequalities, and they face continuous forms of oppression (6).

## **Mega-dams and infrastructure**

Along with extractivism, the construction of infrastructure needed to process and transport the produced goods also advances; this includes mega-dams to produce energy.

For example, in the Beni River basin, which crosses the Madidi National Park—one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet—and the Pilón Lajas Reserve, the government has been trying to promote the Chepete and Bala mega-dams for years. It is estimated that 75 percent of the energy produced by the Bala dam would be exported to Brazil. Both reservoirs would flood thousands of square kilometers, and it is estimated that more than 100,000 hectares would be deforested. Six groups of Indigenous Peoples live on the lands that would be submerged: the Mosetenes, Chimanes, Esse-ejjas, Lecos, Tacanas and Uchupiamonas—the nation to which Ruth belongs (7).

Construction of the dams has been paralyzed so far, but harassment and pressure continue. Furthermore, to build dams it is necessary to create roads, which would open up the territory to logging and mining companies, among other destructive activities. Ruth explains: "It is a fact that this whole avalanche of extractive activities and of regulations that facilitate and encourage them—in addition to large energy and transport infrastructure, industrial complexes of dubious technical and economic viability (such as the San Buenaventura sugar mill) and the encroachment of settlers and land speculators—together constitute of a real crusade of colonization and plundering of the northern Amazon, where the big losers are communities and Indigenous Peoples."

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## The indigenous view on deforestation and their resistance struggles

However, during the conversation Ruth remarked how Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia have historically played a central role in the defense of the territories, and still stand firm in their struggle.

As a result of the struggles of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia—from the Amazon, the Chaco, the Valleys and the Altiplano—the New Political Constitution of the State was created in 2009 (CPE by its Spanish acronym). It recognizes Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Territories, Indigenous Peasant Justice, and mainly the Autonomy and Self-Determination of Indigenous Peoples in their territories by pre-existing right, based on ILO Convention 169, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Laws 3.760 and 3.897 in Bolivia.

However, Ruth explained that other laws and decrees have been systematically issued which contravene the provisions of the Constitution, the Magna Carta and other laws such as the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth. In Ruth's analysis, it is these lower-ranking regulations that are imposed as government policy, "legalizing illegal and unconstitutional activities to support an extractive, capitalist economic policy, wherein large national and transnational capital and businessmen successfully get regulations made to fit their interests."

Thus, for example, from 2013-2019, a set of regulations known as the "incendiary rules" were passed; these rules directly or indirectly increase the amount of hectares that people are allowed to deforest and burn—thereby making the legal mechanisms in force in the country more flexible. Similarly, the Mining and Metallurgy Law 535 from the same period allows mining within Protected Areas, without the need to comply with regulations such as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). It also allows mining within Indigenous Territories and exempts mining companies from carrying out Free Prior and Informed Consultation with Indigenous Peoples (FPIC), with the argument that miners have rights established prior to that law.

In recent years, government policies have favored big economic powers, Ruth says. "These policies violate the integrity of Mother Earth, taking away her virtues and her capacity to give, generate and regenerate life. They are cutting her veins—which are the rivers—for gold mining that uses mercury and for mega-dams. They are stripping her skin through unrelenting deforestation—including with fire—for agribusiness and ranching. They are poisoning her oxygen-producing organs—such as her soils and forests—with agrochemicals, in order to grow soybean or African palm. They are poking and dynamiting her vital veins—which are springs and underground and surface water sources—to look for oil. They are mutilating her exuberant mountains and riverbanks, which were created to appreciate beauty and abundant life. This abundance of life is languishing today, because mining companies—which hide behind 'community mining cooperatives' or 'small mining' activities to avoid paying taxes or a paltry 2.5 percent royalty—are connected to Chinese, Brazilian and Colombian transnational companies and large national companies.

Ruth also explains that these policies are subjecting Indigenous Peoples to extreme poverty. "Not having water means extreme poverty. Nothing is possible without water," she warns. "Then the process of extinction of the Amazon will occur through exodus, because those of us who have ancestrally inhabited, cared for, protected and defended the Amazon will leave to look for what we no longer have in our spaces. Or we will undergo a process of transformation and become the destroyers of our own territories, because they will force us to become miners or palm growers in order to survive. And so, once stripped of all our dignity, of our identities, of our principles and values, of our spirituality and veneration of sacred Mother Earth, of our rivers and mountains—the forests and territories will be left without their protectors: the Indigenous Peoples."

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But, fortunately, within this cruel panorama for the future of the Amazon and its peoples, Ruth shares her vision of hope, with Indigenous Peoples in ongoing struggle.

New generations are also beginning to rethink the future they want. From Ruth's perspective, as soon as more young people begin to understand that it is not the right of those living today to deprive the youth of what is rightfully theirs in the very near future, hope will grow.

TO FIGHT FOR TERRITORY IS TO FIGHT FOR LIFE!

AND TO LIVE WITH SELF-DETERMINATION IS AN INALIENABLE RIGHT OF OUR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES!

This article is based on an interview with Ruth Alipaz Cuqui, leader of the Uchupiamona Nation from the Bolivian Amazon, and member of the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas (CONTIOCAP); and the following sources of information:

- (1) [Izquierda Diario, Incendios forestales: los intereses agroindustriales ante la mirada tibia del gobierno](#), November 2023
- (2) Fundación Tierra, [Deforestación 2016-2021. El pragmatismo irresponsable de la “Agenda Patriótica 2025.”](#) June 2022
- (3) Rojas Calizaya, J; Anzaldo García, A., [El nuevo PLUS del Beni excluye a los actores y sus diversas visiones de desarrollo y atenta contra la Amazonía boliviana](#), Cipca, 2020
- (4) Cejis, [Análisis socioambiental del Plan de Uso de Suelo \(PLUS\) 2019 del departamento del Beni](#), 2020
- (5) RTP Bolivia, [Video: Engineer Javier Mamani Quispe, General Coordinator to foment production](#), January 2023
- (6) See the ["Palm Oil" section](#) on WRM's website
- (7) WRM Bulletin, [“Without water there is no life”: The rivers of the Bolivian Amazon](#), September 2022