
Chile: The Mapuche peoples' resistance to the plantation invasion

The commune of Lumaco, with its 11.405 inhabitants, is located in the Ninth Region of Chile. From the standpoint of the ancient Mapuche territoriality and the present Mapuche claim to territorial identities in this Region, Lumaco corresponds to the political centre of the Mapuche-Nalche (also known as “nagche” and “nag-che”) territory.

In spite of the fact that the commune presently has very reduced areas of native forest (14,982 hectares representing 13.4% of the area) in a distressing state of conservation and very fragmented, the Lumaco forest is part of one of the planet's last and most extensive Humid Forests in the Cold Temperate Region. Regarding human food resources, although a smaller number of food plant species is to be found than in rainforests, there are many plants that can be used as food (fruit, stems, tubers, fleshy roots and seeds) and a considerable variety and quantity of mushrooms.

During the military dictatorship large scale monoculture tree plantations were violently introduced into this region, imposed from an institutional framework that is still in place. Its main instrument is Decree Law 701, which displaced agriculture and livestock systems and native forests. Ecological fragility and the scant agricultural suitability of this land served to qualify tree plantations as the only feasible activity to fight and curb erosion. However, these considerations did not take into account the existence of alternative forms and techniques for agricultural production suited to these conditions or the development of alternative production to industrial tree plantations, such as some fruit species (cherries, blueberries, olives) among other alternatives.

In a territory where over 70 per cent of the population is Mapuche, only 15 per cent of the 111,900 hectares of the commune's area are occupied by Mapuche communities. For this majority of the population, forestry activities have been nefarious. In the first place they contributed to a sharp reduction in the rural population, breaking up their economic systems and subsistence strategies. Secondly, in spite of the promises of economic welfare advertised by the promoters of this forestry model, the inhabitants of the areas where it is developed do not have access to these so-called benefits. According to a survey carried out in the year 2000, Lumaco has a high poverty index: 60 per cent of the population live under the poverty line and 33 per cent of them live in extreme poverty. Other associated indexes are: 23.7 per cent illiteracy, a 26.3 per cent school drop-out rate and the infant mortality rate is 17.05 per cent. According to UNDP (2000), the Human Development Index for the community of Lumaco stands at 31.9 per cent. This value is considered to be very low and this indicator places Lumaco among the worst rated communes in Chile.

The explosive expansion of areas under pine and eucalyptus plantation in Lumaco is also associated with the commune's process of serious environmental degradation: destruction of the native forest, loss of biodiversity, reduction and contamination of ground and surface sources of water, erosion processes and other soil degradation processes such as soil compaction. Health problems have also been recorded in the communities surrounding the plantations.

While a small group of medium and large timber producers (who mainly reside in the urban zones of Lumaco and neighbouring communes) and pulp-mill industrialists (national and transnational groups)

are the beneficiaries, the local rural population receives the negative impacts of the model on their economic, productive, environmental, health (physical and mental) and cultural systems, which as a whole imply severe prejudice to their quality of life.

From the cultural standpoint, the expansion of monoculture tree plantations has led to an impoverishment of Mapuche culture at the level of knowledge and has prevented reproduction of their own way of life. An example of this situation are the socio-cultural impacts of the loss of the native forest: changes in their food patterns, the progressive abandoning of traditional medicine, the collapse of beliefs and relations established with the spiritual world, among others.

Mapuche organizations have launched a struggle against this noxious process, based on ethnic and political arguments in defence of their cultural heritage, thus showing that cultural safeguarding can become an important strategy to face the forestry model.

In December 1997, Mapuche community members from Lumaco occupied the land planted with trees and subsequently burnt two trucks that were taking timber out of the Pidenco Fundo in the commune of Lumaco. This incident marked the beginning of a direct dialogue between industrialists and the State, which took on a defensive and offensive role, invoking the State Internal Security Law. At the same time the complaints of the Mapuche population entered a new stage. Members and leaders of Mapuche organizations have kept up sharp criticism of the presence of plantation companies in the area. This criticism is the only organized manifestation against the presence of these companies in the commune. It is organized around various poles which from the Mapuche cultural perspective are recognized to be inter-related. Among such poles is the relationship between what is environmental and what is cultural, while the loss of resources also implies the loss of knowledge and with it, pauperization of their living conditions. Through their proposals, the Mapuche have sought to find a solution to the problems of loss of land, water shortage and the drop in agricultural production. They identify the plantation companies as being directly responsible and the State as abetting them.

In this way the Mapuche have faced numerous court cases, imprisonment and persecution, raids and permanent surveillance of the communities; beatings, shootings, kidnappings and death-threats by the police, investigators and non-identified civilians and even the murder of three young Mapuche that has remained totally unpunished. Special laws, created during the Military Regime to repress opposition to the dictatorship have also been applied, such as the Antiterrorist Law (law 18,314) in addition to the State Interior Security Law.

Presently there are over 200 Mapuche community members being held for trial and 11 Mapuche political prisoners are being held in the prisons of Concepcion, Angol, Traiguén and Lebu. Among these are Lonkos (a traditional authority), Werken (Lonko assistant) and community leaders in addition to others who are in hiding or who are subject to precautionary measures. There are accusations against them based on witnesses who have no face and false testimonials. The Minister of the Interior of the Bachelet Government even recognized that there have been contradictory sentences and the President's political party has acknowledged that during the Lagos Government there was disproportionate and unjust use of antiterrorist legislation that allows for abhorrent trials, denounced by the United Nations Rapporteur for Indigenous Rights.

It is in this context that Patricia Troncoso, Juan Huenulao, Jaime Marileo and Juan Marileo, Mapuche political prisoners held in Angol prison, accused and sentenced in the criminal case of Terrorist Arson to ten years and a day of imprisonment, in addition to the payment of \$ 424.964,798 in compensation to the MININCO forestry company, launched a hunger strike on 13 March for an indefinite time in order to demand liberation of all the Mapuche political prisoners, non-use of the antiterrorist law and

revision of the criminal case for which they have been unjustly condemned.

The hunger strike gave rise to numerous mobilizations in Chile and protests accompanying President Michelle Bachelet's European tour. In Madrid on 10 May she was summonsed by the Nobel prize-winner, José Saramago to "look at the Mapuche."

While repression and arrests continued in the Mapuche communities, tense negotiations were taking place in the midst of which the strikers suspended their hunger strike on 14 May 2006 in view of the commitment by members of parliament of the official party that they would adopt a Bill allowing for a regime of probation. However, this project did not have the political backing of the Government coalition. The president of the main Government party, Senator Soledad Alvear (DC) declared that the project would be unconstitutional as it would violate "equality before the law." At the same time, immediately after the strike was suspended, the Government declared on 16 May through the Minister Paulina Veloso that it was not endorsing the Bill. On 23 May, President Michelle Bachelet declared that these were "delinquents that had been sentenced" and that she could not intervene in court decisions.

Faced by this lack of fulfilment of the agreements by the Chilean political sector, the four Mapuche prisoners have felt themselves to have been cheated and consider themselves victims of a political operation, taking up their hunger strike once again. The situation of the Mapuche strikers is very delicate and they have been hospitalized. For its part, the Chilean political sector has closed its ranks, alleging that the Mapuche are responsible for breaking-off the agreement and of wrecking a legal solution that in fact had no political support.

In Chile the crisis of confidence between indigenous peoples and the State has seriously deepened and only international mediation can resolve it and take it along the path of peace and primacy of Human Rights.

The life of four Mapuche people in prison is in danger. At this time, their hunger strike personifies the resistance of the Mapuche people to a genocidal legislation, made to measure for the large plantation companies. The World Rainforest Movement makes an appeal for you to join their demand to "close the case of the unjust suit known as the 'Poluko Pidenko Terrorist Arson' and the immediate liberation of the Mapuche Political Prisoners" sending your support to:
<http://www.nodo50.org/varios/mapuches/index.php#4>

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http://www.presopoliticomapuche.org/index_archivos/Noticias.htm ; inputs by Víctor Toledo Llancaqueo, Centro de Políticas Públicas, e-mail: centro@politicaspublicas.cl ,
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