
Ecuador: Human shield in defence of the Mindo forest against oil pipeline

Since the 2nd of January, the inhabitants of local communities, students and environmentalists have been carrying out a permanent and peaceful occupation of the most fragile zone of the Los Guarumos forest, at the entry of the Mindo Nambillo cloud forest, to halt the construction of a new oil pipeline which will cross the whole of Ecuador. The 500 km long oil pipeline will transport heavy crude oil for the Oleoductos de Crudos Pesados (OCP) company, (see bulletin 45, April, 2001).

A number of activists have climbed the trees and built platforms and others are chained to the trunks, with the purpose of preventing the building teams entering the protected zone. Their intention is to remain in the zone until the building company and the government desist in their intention of destroying this unique ecosystem housing a diversity of fauna and flora species, many of which are in danger of extinction. News stations in Ecuador have reported that the police force may evict the demonstrators in the next few days.

The oil pipeline is the beginning of an unprecedented boom of new oil investments: more than 2 billion dollars over the next five years for oil prospecting and extraction, oil pipeline feeding, refineries and infrastructure for related processing. A major part of the crude oil necessary to feed the oil pipeline is to be found in the national parks and indigenous lands, in pristine tropical forests. Prominent environmental and human rights organisations in Ecuador and in the world are requesting the cancellation of the OCP project and a moratorium on all further oil prospecting in the country's forests.

The Westdeutsche Landesbank (WestLB) --of which the Westphalia government holds 43% of its shares-- is funding the OCP project with a 900 million dollar loan. In view of the escalation of complaints, the North Westphalia state government has convened an audience to take place on 14 January. Experts from non-governmental organisations will testify as to the way the project is violating the minimum criteria for environmental protection, established by the World Bank. According to WestLB, abidance with the standards of the World Bank is a "prerequisite for any financial commitment by the WestLB in the project."

For its part, OCP announced yesterday that it may abandon building work in the Mindo cloud forest during the rainy season that ends in April. While construction of the rest of the stretches along the OCP route continues, protests by Mindo were mentioned as a weighty factor in the consortium's decision to temporarily suspend work in the region.

The environmentalists mention another reason: the consortium's fears regarding funding. "It is obvious that the OCP Consortium does not want bulldozers facing the defenders of trees at the very time that the 900 million dollar loan is running a serious risk in Germany. This is a significant factor in the OCP announcement that building in Mindo has been suspended," stated Ivonne Ramos from Acción Ecológica.

"We are calling on the North Westphalia Parliament to ensure that WestLB does not contribute to the irreversible loss of threatened ecosystems. We urge the Bank to cancel this loan immediately," said

Atossa Soltani from Amazon Watch.

The construction of the Heavy Oil Pipeline continues to advance at an amazing rate, overriding the opposition of the peoples and local governments and in complete violation of constitutional and legal precepts for environmental protection and respect for the rights of the inhabitants of the zones it passes through. This attitude is generating reactions such as those of the inhabitants of Mindo, or what is being prepared this week in the city of Lago Agrio, where the local population will also prevent continuation of OCP works.

Contrary to what has been said about the benefits it will generate for the country, the facts show the true characteristics of this work. In the field of labour, the strike by Estación Amazonas workers has revealed the very poor working conditions that those who are employed by the Techint company are submitted to. In the field of taxation, evasion of all types of tariffs and taxes shows the non-contribution to the country generated by the construction of the OCP.

Julia Butterfly Hill, an environmentalist and defender of forests, known all over the world for her long stay on a threatened 2000 year old redwood tree in California, has sent a message of solidarity to the Ecuadorian people: "When we see these Ecuadorian activists prepared to put their bodies where their beliefs are, facing serious danger and adversity, we know that all the other systems fail --corporations, governments and consumers-- all fail in their responsibility towards the planet, towards the people and towards the future. I feel solidarity with my brothers and sisters from Ecuador while they maintain themselves against this absolute avariciousness, destruction and consumption of these invaluable and diverse ecosystems. Alienation of this forest and of all its inhabitants because of the laying of the oil pipeline and the extraction of oil is absolutely incorrect --morally, socially, culturally and ecologically. I, and many other people, are deeply committed to supporting the Ecuadorian people in stopping this crime against humanity and against the Earth."