
Argentina: Forest destruction and authoritarianism in Santiago del Estero

Northern Santiago del Estero Province is mostly inhabited by people of mixed Quichua and Spanish descent. During the 19th century the province -as well as the whole region of the Great Chaco- suffered the environmental destruction provoked by powerful European logging companies, which used peasants as workers under a near-slavery system. After the region was almost completely deforested and logging was no longer profitable, foreign companies left the country leaving a landscape of devastation and poverty behind. Once again a product originated in the Latin American territory was exhausted with no benefit in the short or the long term for local dwellers: a new cycle in the country's economic history was over. Nevertheless, the consequences of such kind of "progress" have given rise to present-time socio-environmental conflicts.

After the departure of European logging companies, poor peasants that used to work for them began to occupy those abandoned territories and to use them for agriculture. Roads, schools and small farms began to cover the region. Their land property rights -mentioned in the Argentinian law- were never recognized by the authorities. Nowadays more than 14,000 families in Santiago del Estero live on vegetable and cotton production, lacking property titles on the land they have occupied for generations. After having resisted the successive military governments that ruled the country during the 1970s, once democracy was restored in the 1980s several organizations were created to defend peasants' rights to land and to a better life. One of them is the Peasants Movement of Santiago del Estero (Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero - MOCASE). But democracy has not meant a solution to Santiago del Estero's peasants. Local communities are still suffering threats, intimidation, segregation, arbitrary detentions and physical violence by the police and hired thugs. Provincial police and local big landowners are involved in these kinds of actions, acting under the protection of the Provincial Governor Carlos Juárez, called "el Tata" ("the Grandfather").

The population of Santiago del Estero -and especially the poorer- are living now the worst repression period since the last military dictatorship. After the successful mobilization of La Simona in October 1999 -when villagers stopped the destruction of community crops, forests and houses belonging to a group of families who had lived in the area for more than 60 years, to the hands of personnel of the company Mimbres S.A.- violence against civil society members increased. Threats to local peasants and technicians who work with them, false accusations of cattle theft, direct attacks to people in their own houses (as the one that happened on May 24th at Quimili against Savino Chávez and his family) have multiplied. Recently the Argentinian Association of Independent Journals (ADEPA) severely criticised the governor because of censorship, violence and authoritarianism reigning in the Province.

MOCASE has organized a solidarity campaign in order to stop such abuses and to reach a fair solution to the problem. Those interested in cooperating can contact MOCASE headquarters at: cenep@arnet.com.ar

Article based on information from: Elsa Ortalda, 24/6/2000,

