
Mexico: False accusations of "eco-terrorism" and "ecological crimes"

Local indigenous and peasant communities are usually accused of forest degradation and are either evicted from their lands, or repressed, or both. At the same time, logging companies which benefit from deforestation, receive support from those same governments that accuse local peoples of destroying the environment. The following two cases from Mexico constitute but a drop in a sea of many such cases occurring throughout the world.

The case of Rodolfo Montiel, a peasant who organized resistance against the destruction of the Sierra of Petatlán forest in the Pacific Coast state of Guerrero by multinational logging company Boise Cascade is a paradigmatic example of such resistance (see WRM Bulletin 26). Arrested in 1999 under the accusation of committing "eco-terrorism" and subject to torture and ill-treatment since, Montiel's arrest has galvanized a coalition of environmentalists and human rights activists in his defence. In May 2000, being still in jail, he received the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for courageous activism and was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.

The conflict that has arisen between the indigenous communities living in the margins of the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, in the famous Lacandona Forest, and the authorities constitute another case that sheds light on environmental conflict in Mexico. More than 870 indigenous families living in the area -most of them refugees from the 1994 armed conflict in Chiapas- are being threatened with eviction by the authorities and accused of committing "ecological crimes" to the detriment of the reserve. Four out of the twelve communities involved have accepted to be resettled in another region, under the condition that the remaining communities' right to stay at Montes Azules is respected. The latter have promised to respect the reserve and asked support for sustainable production projects. However, both national and Chiapas state authorities are turning a deaf ear to their demands. Moreover, it is feared that repression against them might occur, considering that Chiapas is still a conflictive region and that peasants are in general considered to be potential Zapatista rebels. Lately they have been accused of provoking fires in the Lacandona Forests, which proved to be false, since the Secretary for the Environment, Natural Resources and Fishing (SEMARNAP) himself admitted that there is no emergency fire situation at the Montes Azules Reserve. The Mexican League for the Defence of Human Rights is urging the authorities to defend the peasant communities' rights and to pay attention to their demands. Additionally, they addressed SEMARNAP asking it to focus on the illegal logging being carried out by large timber companies, which constitutes the real cause of forest degradation at the Montes Azules Reserve.

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