
Colombia: the Embera Katio's struggle for life

The Urra hydroelectric dam megaproject on the Sinu River, at the Cordoba Department in the Atlantic region of Colombia has provoked concern and resistance since its very start in 1977. The Embera Katio indigenous people, ancestral dwellers of the affected area, who live on fishing and hunting, and whose livelihoods and existence are severely menaced by this project are fighting an unequal battle against both the company Urra and the Colombian government which openly supports it. More than 7,000 hectares of forests will be flooded by the dam reservoir of the projected dam, whose total cost will reach the sum of U\$S 800 million.

In spite of the conclusions of two decisions of the Constitutional High Court of Colombia, the filling up of URRÁ 1 dam on the Sinu River began last 20 November, following Resolution 0965 of the Ministry of the Environment.

This situation constitutes both an environmental catastrophe and a genocide. Downstream from the dam, the river level has already decreased dramatically, resulting in the collapse of the river's banks and the entailing destruction of the peoples' houses. The most valuable fish for the Embera's diet -a species called "bocachico"- is massively dying in the suddenly drying wetlands. At the same time, the Embera Katio indigenous peoples living upstream are powerless to prevent the flooding of their fields, sacred sites, cemeteries and houses, with the consequent destruction of their traditional culture.

The violation of the indigenous peoples' environmental rights is accompanied by that of their and their supporters' human rights. Many of such violations have occurred since the starting of project in 1977. Most of the more prominent opponents of the project -Embera Katio leaders, fishermen representatives, scientists and intellectuals, advisers of the indigenous people- have been either murdered, threatened or forced into exile.

Almost two hundred Embera Katio have begun a 700-kilometer march on foot to Bogota from the Alto Sinu area to demand the immediate suspension of the dam works and to protest against the permanent insecurity and violence that menaces them. Another group of 40 Embera Katio families, composed by some 200 women, men and children, moved to an area facing imminent flooding by the Urra 1 hydroelectric dam and began settling in for a long-term occupation to accompany the 20 families who have been traditionally living in the site. Another 50 families are expected to join them. The Embera Katio are also asking supporters from outside their community to participate in the occupation.

The Embera Katio indigenous peoples, together with the communities of fisherfolk and farmers living in the Sinu River basin are asking for solidarity and request supporters to publicly denounce these facts to the Colombian authorities, urging them to immediately stop the works in accordance with the two relevant decisions of the Constitutional Court, and to undertake the necessary steps to effectively protect biodiversity and indigenous peoples' rights in Colombia.

