
Colombia: The Bari people in defense of their territory

The Bari people, a minority belonging to the Arawak family known as the Children of the Forest, inhabit the Catatumbo Basin in the north of the Department of Santander. The Motilon Bari have a language known as Bari-ara and their own internal and external political and social organization. Their supreme authority is the Autonomous Council of Chiefs, comprising 23 Caciques (Chiefs) from the 23 communities of the Motilon indigenous people. Their economy is geared towards self-sufficiency and therefore the defence of their territory implies the defence of the natural assets that are at the base of their existence.

Over the years, the Motilón Bari have suffered a constant loss of territory to powerful trade interests that have sought to profit from the wealth it contains. Their integrity was threatened once again when in May 2005 the Ministry of the Environment authorized ECOPETROL operations (see WRM Bulletin No. 106), in spite of the many deficiencies appearing in the Environmental Impact Assessment submitted initially.

However, violation of the Bari People's human rights does not cease there. To the military presence on their territory supporting this mega-project and affecting this people's freedom of circulation and the holding of cultural and subsistence activities, is now added their concern over the central government's intention to spray toxic chemicals in the area and even in places such as natural parks. This will affect the Bari territory, contaminating sources of water, subsistence crops and the animal species on which the Bari feed, finally affecting community members' health.

Faced by this situation, the Autonomous Council of Bari Chiefs, the Colombian Association of Motilon Bari Communities "Asocbari", will hold an open meeting on 12 October at Tibu in the north of Santander, under the slogan "We will pronounce ourselves in defense of our territory", with the aim of:

1. Convening State authorities and institutions to obtain their commitment to solve the Bari Indigenous People's problems and to demand explanations on the decisions they are taking that violate the Indigenous People's rights.
2. Giving visibility to the serious violation of the Bari Indigenous People's rights, by ignoring our presence at Socbacaira, our ancestral territory where the oil prospecting and exploitation project is being carried out (Alamo Well I).
3. Submitting to the authorities, institutions and Colombian State the following requests:
 - Recognition of the presence of the Bari People on their ancestral territories
 - Suspension of the implementation of the Alamo I project for oil prospecting and exploitation
 - Cancellation of Environmental Licence 0624 of 15 May 2005 to undertake prospecting of the Alamo I well, due to the irregular way it was granted, inter alia, certification by the Ministry of the Interior Division for Ethnic Groups that no indigenous communities existed at Socbacayra, known as Alamo I by ECOPETROL
 - That the Colombian State, Military Forces, ECOPETROL and civilian and military and security bodies fulfil their constitutional obligation to protect and guarantee the rights of the indigenous peoples, that they cease violating these rights and take the necessary steps to prevent this occurring in the future.

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