
Colombia: The Mutilon Bari Indigenous Peoples rise up for their rights against oil interests

The Mutilon Bari Indigenous Peoples have been settled for thousands of years in the basin of the Catatumbo River, in the Department of Northern Santander (Colombia). It is a forest zone, covering an area of approximately 126,600 ha and shares its frontier with Venezuela. Its humid forests, that act as a natural filter for Lake Maracaibo (Venezuela), have considerable potential regarding biodiversity, wood and minerals, hydrocarbons and water resources.

This potential and particularly the presence of oil is the reason why the Mutilon Bari are exposed to continuous incursions by transnational corporations, especially in the Municipalities of Tibu and Tarra. As early as 1904, oil companies such as COLPET (the Colombia Petroleum Company) and SAGO (South American Gulf Oil Company) entered the region and now ECOPETROL has installed itself.

All the companies have followed an extractive pattern, ruthlessly exploiting non-renewable resources, depredating the zone's natural resources and impairing biodiversity. Damage to the environment has been irreparable and has affected the vegetation, the fauna and aquifers, generating or exacerbating erosion processes and contaminating water and soil, just to mention a few of the impacts. On some occasions extractive activities have also implied the displacement and eviction of the Mutilon Bari communities from their territories.

The reduction of the territory ancestrally occupied by these indigenous peoples, with the constant ignoring and violation of their rights has also involved a loss of natural and cultural values placing at risk the survival of the Indigenous communities.

Protected by Environmental License 0624 of 16 May 2005, an attempt is being made to impose a project for oil prospecting and exploitation under the name of ALAMO I in their territories. The process has various irregularities, among them disregard for the indigenous peoples' rights consecrated in international and national conventions, absence of prior consultation by the ECOPETROL extractive company and the presence of the Colombian National Army in the project's area of influence with the aim of "safeguarding" the well, but which implies the prevention of free movement of the Bari people and of carrying out their productive, social and cultural activities.

The Bari People have reacted by launching a process to defend their territories. One of the measures is a legal action known in the national laws as "Action of Guardianship" seeking to protect the Bari Peoples' human rights. This legal action was rejected by the courts at the first and second instance. At this time, the findings of the second instance have been submitted to the Constitutional Court for examination and probable revision.

In this court action, the Mutilon Bari Community Association of Colombia requests the Colombian Constitutional Court "to revise the above-mentioned guardianship which seeks to protect the basic rights that are presently being violated with the execution of the Alamo I prospecting and exploitation project in our ancestral and sacred territory and the arbitrary action of the National Army that is

located in the zone with the mission of safeguarding the project.”

As they denounce in their petition, the Army has invaded their hunting and fishing grounds and the places where they celebrate their cultural rituals and ceremonies –such as the marathons (a cultural and sacred activity in which they carry out an exercise of recognition and contact with their territory)– attacking the free movement of the Bari in their own territory and preventing them from having access to their sacred places. This situation has led to arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment and even attacks against the Bari's personal integrity and their lives.

The Motilon Bari say that “Now our grandparents do not know what to make of this situation. Mother Earth is crying, our culture, our cosmovision and our ethnic group are again in danger. Irremediable prejudice is being caused because the damage done so far and that can be done in the future to our sacred way of life cannot be repaired with money or any other goods.”

In the document “Oil exploitation in Catatumbo - Colombia; the Genocide of the Bari People,” its author Ashcayra Arabadora Acrora, Delegate of the Autonomous Council of Bari Chiefs, Motilon Bari Community Association of Colombia states that “Mother Earth is a living being, we cannot understand this type of activity and we oppose it, many animals in our region have disappeared, life is the Earth, she maintains life, life is water and sun, for us oil is a problem. It brings us much violence. Together with the oil companies come armed groups”.

We exhort you to send your support to the Autonomous Council of Bari Chiefs – ASOCBARI, e-mail: puebloindigenabari@yahoo.es , subscribing the claim presented to the Colombian Constitutional Court, at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Colombia/Bari.pdf>