
Colombia: The Forestry (logging) Bill was adopted without discussion

Following the adoption of the Forestry Bill in Congress, it was sent for presidential sanction on 13 December 2005. President Alvaro Uribe objected to 12 of the articles of the Law and it was expected that the text would be returned with the objections for discussion by Congress as set out in the procedure. Although the government's objections – in the case of being adopted – do not solve the problems involved in this Law designed to hand over the country's forests to the logging companies, it was expected that these objections would at least be given time for debate by the members of parliament. However, this was not the case.

The Forestry Bill was adopted on 28 March during the Chamber plenary meeting. The session took place in an accelerated, confused and unintelligible way and the presidential objections were enunciated. They were all adopted without discussion in just a few minutes, without providing the interested parties with the opportunity to know what was being adopted. The most shameful thing was that while it was being adopted, the parliamentarians were holding lively discussions in the corridors using their cell phones or laughing in a grotesque performance. Many of us who attended the Chamber premises as observers and who had been waiting for the debate were unaware that it had taken place. The following day, during the Senate Plenary, the way in which it was adopted was even more aberrant, because it was a Plenary with scant participation of the Senate. Without checking the quorum the Forestry Bill was addressed during one session lasting a few minutes where it was rapidly presented and with absolutely no discussion of the adoption of the government's objections to the Bill. These facts reiterate the shady interests in deceitfully passing a totally illegitimate law, evading public debate.

The unfortunate way this bill was adopted leaves us with serious questionings and the feeling that the procedure followed was illegal or at least non ethical.

This shows once again the government's eagerness to implement a perverse and ill-intentioned strategy to dissuade growing criticism of the Forestry Bill and to leave the legal framework unaltered in substance thus enabling the large logging investors to have easy access to the country's forests while enjoying privileges. This was made evident throughout the process with the main private companies exerting pressure as lobbyists to have the Bill adopted, in close collaboration with Chemonics (USAID) and the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment, overriding the serious and repeated criticism expressed by various sectors of Colombian society.

There is also evidence that it is only now that the parliamentarians have been given Congress Gazette No. 50, dated 24 March 2006, containing the Government's objections. Therefore there was no preparation for the debate. Even with the acceptance of the 12 objections, the Bill was adopted just as it came from Chamber Commission V, which in essence did not change the structure, the objectives or the scope of the Bill, as in fact work was carried out on "cleaning up and adapting the language" to overcome formal difficulties regarding the unconstitutionality involved in this regulation.

The objective was to mask some of the Bill's perverse aspects, particularly those related with the future both of public forests and of those belonging to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

The lack of responsibility of most of the Congress members and of the national Government is clearly manifest when addressing an issue that is as transcendental for the country as the preservation and sustainable management of the nation's natural heritage, one of the planet's most important forest ecosystems. Following this aberrant procedure during Congress plenary meetings, the only step pending is presidential sanction of the Bill.

We appeal to Indigenous, peasant, Afro-Colombian and environmental organizations and to those who feel that the heritage rights of the Nation's forests and the rights of the Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant communities are being violated to express their rejection of the injurious Forestry Bill and to carry out action to enable the forests to be preserved for the country's present and future generations. Likewise, to obtain recognition of the importance of appropriate, sustainable, responsible, participative and autonomous management by the true owners, who conserve and enrich the forests of Colombia.

Various Colombian organizations are promoting a campaign against this Bill. Those wishing to join in the campaign should please send your support to the following e-mail address: bosques@censat.org

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