
Honduras: International delegation documents serious problems in Olancho

During the month of July 2003, measures of intimidation and threats towards members of the Environmental Movement of Olancho (Movimiento Ambientalista de Olancho –MAO) culminating in the murder of Carlos Arturo Reyes from the El Rosario community, Salama Municipality, Olancho on 18 July 2002 (see WRM Bulletin 72) were denounced before Honduran and international public opinion.

Representatives of MAO and local Human Rights bodies, together with a group of Canadian, United States, French, Italian and Mexican citizens present in the country set up an international delegation that visited various communities located in four municipalities in the Department of Olancho (Gualaco, San Esteban, Catacamas and Salama) to gather testimonials from those affected and data on the violent situation in this and other parts of the country.

Various problems were identified, related with:

- an agrarian conflict, causing the violent eviction of 23 families
- the implementation of a hydroelectric project that does not enjoy consensus among the municipal population
- the felling and illegal trading of timber and the action of institutions regarding environmental protection
- the damage caused by open-cast mining, a practice that according to witnesses, is increasing
- violence, coercion and threats against certain people, very often those who have had a leading role in social movements or that have shown civilly and peacefully, their disagreement with some political decision or with the action of specific groups.

Although the interviewees stress the damage caused by illegal logging and marketing of timber, they also denounce the way in which management plans are designed and granted by the institutions, in particular the Honduran Corporation for Forestry Development (Corporación Hondureña de Desarrollo Forestal – CODEHFOR). One of the most relevant aspects is related with the modus operandi as, on the one hand, CODEHFOR is responsible for supervising marketing (through the granting of management plans and licences to exploit forests) but, on the other hand, this same attribution makes it responsible for monitoring sustainable resource use. The compatibility of these two functions has been questioned by environmentalists, who base their criticism on the fact that many of CODEHFOR's managers have been or are, directly related to the timber business.

For his part, the procurator for the environment and natural resources, although focussing on claims against individuals who are involved in timber traffic, recognises in his own way that political will has been lacking on the part of the executive power (CODEHFOR reports to the executive power, while the environmental procurator reports to the legislative power) to promote measures making it possible to act more efficiently against illegal timber traffic and corruption linked to this type of activity.

In this respect, the merely coercive measures proposed by the institutions are negatively perceived

by civil society actors committed to forest defence. According to them, so-called militarization is both unable to halt forest logging, and is turned into an instrument to legitimize management plans prepared in accordance with the interests of major logging companies. On the other hand, many of those interviewed have denounced that within this rationale what has been sought is to criminalize peaceful action, while they underscore that almost none of the murders of MAO members have been thoroughly investigated and nor have all the implications been clarified.

However, beyond the conflicts between environmentalists and logging companies directly related to forest exploitation, a major problem shows its head: that of water. In all the cases reported by the delegation, the link between forest logging and water scarcity is highlighted, as for example in San Pedro de Catacamas, where the disappearance of wells has led the population to block systematically the log-transporting trucks in their municipality. This shows up the population's interest in managing its own resources, an aspiration that does not seem to be considered by the corresponding institutions.

In turn, the lack of water sets a problem of food security for the population that, on seeing its efforts to harvest food fail, take the road to more fertile and irrigated zones in national protected areas (particularly the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve). However, in this case the police forces are evicting those who are displaced from other zones, in compliance with the environmental law. Thus, because of a lack of consideration of all the facets of the problem, the victims of environmental degradation become the culprits.

It should be noted that, in the framework of the Meso-American Biological Corridor, the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve is to be united with the Bosawas (Nicaragua) Biosphere Reserve in a trans-frontier zone. The peasant population of the Bosawas reserve has also been evicted due to lack of land, seeking plots for cultivation. The first 100 families evicted last May have been left to their luck in the lands belonging to an agricultural cooperative located on the outskirts of the reserve. The prolongation of this precarious situation and the perspective of a second eviction phase --500 more families-- threaten to trigger off a major conflict. According to information from the Bosawas project of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Natural Resources (MARENA), one of the determining factors in the eviction has been the World Bank proposal to finance a drinking water project (and later an electric energy generation project) which will use the water resources of the Bosawas reserve.

Finally, it is surprising to note the increase of mining concessions as a "collateral" effect of forest exploitation projects. For the local population, forest exploitation is a first stage, followed by mining exploitation when the forest is depleted. In both cases depredation affects the water supply for the affected population (scarcity due to logging of the forest and cyanide contamination in the case of mining exploitation).

Some 160 families live in San Pedro de Catacamas, mainly surviving on agriculture and animal husbandry. One of the inhabitants told us that the logging companies have been extracting timber from the forest for years now, taking the logs to be processed somewhere else. The inhabitants mention the Sansoni, Landizabal and Meselaya companies as involved in ransacking and processing this resource. With their action, the community has achieved the total halting of logging on their territory.

In spite of this, the inhabitants of San Pedro de Catacamas live with the effects of previous exploitation, droughts being the hardest felt consequence. The 300 wells in the community have dried up. During the winter, they manage with rainwater, but in the summer there is a water crisis and the community members must walk for many hours to find water for domestic use.

For this reason, the inhabitants of various communities in the neighbouring municipality of Gualaco took strong action against the construction of the Babilonia River hydroelectric dam, part of the regional Puebla-Panama Plan project (see WRM bulletin 73) granted in a 30-year concession to the ENERGISA hydroelectric company. It is suspected that members of the national congress have direct interests in this company. According to Rafael Ulloa, former mayor of Gualaco, the Babilonia river water concession "leaves 11 communities without access to this water." He adds, "Once the dam is built --the decree is clear-- water is to generate energy, they own the water and the community does not benefit from the project, it does not have the right to protest or anything."

Father Andres Tamayo, the parish priest of Salama, with a death threat hanging over him, explained that approximately 40% of the national budget for candidates of the Honduran National and Liberal parties comes from the sale of timber. This makes him doubt that any of them or COHDEFOR will be willing to question the events in Olancho. Regarding the responsibility of foreign governments and transnational companies in the Olancho situation, Father Tamayo stated "if the rich countries of the world were really interested in 'reducing poverty' surely at this stage there would be some sign that poverty has been reduced, with all that has been invested over the past 60 years. Or perhaps this investment is precisely to maintain the unjust system exactly as it is?"

Excerpts and adaptation of the "Informe de la visita realizada por una delegación internacional al departamento de Olancho – Honduras del 25 al 27 de julio de 2003" (Report of the visit paid by an international delegation to the department of Olancho – Honduras, from 25 to 27 June 2003), sent by Helena Roux, e-mail: lisatrenza@free.fr