
Mexico: Complaints that Conservation International is requesting repression against Zapatistas and peasants

The US conservation group, Conservation International (CI) is requesting the Mexican government to use its armed forces to crush the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) once and for all, according to reports in the Mexican newspaper "La Jornada." The organisation maintains that the guerrilla group and the "illegal" invasion by peasants of the Lacandona forest are destroying the tropical forest, and therefore military intervention is necessary.

The Lacandona forest in Chiapas has undergone innumerable types of exploitation over the centuries, ranging from deforestation for timber, the establishment of large cattle ranches, oil exploitation and hydroelectric dams, to more recently, the privatisation of biological diversity.

The Mexican government declared part of the jungle as a Biosphere Reserve in the seventies, without any consultations with the inhabitants of the region. In this reserve, known as Montes Azules Integral Biosphere Reserve, are located not only EZLN bases but also 28 villages of "invaders" that the CI wants President Vicente Fox's administration to evict.

According to the electronic journal, Corporate Watch, to say that the Lacandona forest is being destroyed by "ignorant peasants" and "left-wing terrorists" is a crass and unjust simplification, ignoring the complex socio-economic situation, the savage social inequality and class conflicts in the south of Mexico.

"We have been accused of destroying the jungle. But as an indigenous people, we are the true guardians of the environment, we live together with the jungle," were the words to Corporate Watch of a resident of Montes Azules, who identified himself with the alias of Juan Gomez, in fear of reprisals by the army. "If the jungle dies, we die with it." Gomez, who is 33 years old, is an indigenous Tzeltal, a third generation resident of Montes Azules and a militant Zapatista.

Corporate Watch emphasized that it was not the indigenous people nor the "invading" peasants who built the cattle-ranches, the hydroelectric dams, motorways and oil wells that have done so much environmental damage to the forest.

Biodiversity is the new loot the transnational corporations are seeking in Chiapas. This diversity is the raw material for agro-chemical, pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. This biological wealth - ranging from genetic sequences to entire organisms, is patented by the corporations and thus privatized for commercial exploitation.

The biologists, "conservationists" and businesspeople involved in this practice call it bio-prospecting. However, for many progressive, environmentalist and civil society groups and indigenous peoples this is bio-piracy. CI has bio-prospecting agreements with various corporations in different parts of the world and maintains that this activity generates incentives for the protection of tropical forests.

The Mexican government, CI and the Pulsar Group, a Mexican company that is the ninth largest

biotechnology company in the world, have established biological research stations in the jungle. However, local residents see these installations as bio-piracy bases. According to ARIC-Independiente, a peasant organisation from Lacandona, before they used to have their gold, timber and land stolen from them, but today it is their "green gold," biodiversity, which is being stolen.

Pulsar, one of CI's major donors, is counting on the biological resources of Chiapas to position itself as biotechnology leader in Latin America. Alfonso Romo, the head of Pulsar is one of the most influential people in the Fox administration.

According to "La Jornada," CI has a Geographical Information System (GIS) for Montes Azules, donated by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and based on photos taken by NASA satellites with a resolution of ten metres. The newspaper also reported that CI carries out weekly reconnaissance missions over the Lacandona forest in a USAID aircraft taking high-resolution photos with a digital camera.

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