
Mexico: The Puebla Panama Plan threatens Los Chimalapas tropical forest

The Zoque forest stretches over the boundaries of the three states of greatest biodiversity in Mexico: Oaxaca, Veracruz and Chiapas. It is the most compact and best conserved continuous forest of North America, with a million hectares that include pine, holm oak and pine-holm oak forests, cloud or mesophile forests, and high, medium and low tropical forests.

Los Chimalapas is the Oaxacan section of the Zoque forest, and its high degree of conservation has been possible thanks to the respectful care of the Zoque indigenous people of Oaxaca. Los Chimalapas communicates with El Ocote in Chiapas and Uxpanapa in Veracruz, through biological corridors.

Hydroelectric dams, highways and tree plantations were unsuccessful megaprojects designed for Los Chimalapas during the Administrations of Presidents José López Portillo, Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas. During the government of Ernesto Zedillo, there was a more misleading proposal: to declare Los Chimalapas a biosphere reserve, but this project could not be implemented due to its rejection by the local people.

The agents of globalization and nature mercantilization can see hidden wealth in the rainforest: stones and sand for southeastern highways, non-metal minerals for the microelectronics industry, water for the dams of Chiapas, labour for the maquiladoras in the southeast. Transport companies and hotels want tourism. Biotechnology demands biodiversity, and Los Chimalapas is considered a unique genetic bank. The Army will in turn facilitate the control of natural reserves and will ensure private investment.

The local people of Zoque make their voices heard from the highest mountains of the Tehuantepec Isthmus: "We need to organize ourselves as peoples, to implement the agrarian law and to declare the invaded zones as peasant ecological reserves, and to restore the mountain forests that burned in 1998. This is our mountain, our house. Imagine you are told how to take care of your house which is then taken away from you. Solve the agricultural conflicts and let us on our own; we would then be able to improve rainforest care."

Far from solving the conflicts, the federal government intends to control all the activities carried out in Los Chimalapas. For that purpose, one of its proposals is the biosphere reserve, whereby peasants are separated from their ancestral land. The new strategy of the government to decree the reserve is to use the Communal Statutes, which are also rejected by the local people because they were not fully involved in their elaboration.

Being Los Chimalapas a strategic place for the industrial and biological corridors of the Puebla Panama Plan (PPP), the megaprojects, industrial and biological corridors and the growth of the cities, planned for the Isthmus puts a direct threat to the natural reserves of Los Chimalapas. An industrial corridor to the west of the Zoque forest around the transisthmic highway; the opening of the Isthmus to global merchandise circulation; maquiladoras; increased oil and petrochemical exploitation in

Salina Cruz, Minatitlán and Coatzacoalcos. Growth of the main cities of the states composing the Tehuantepec Isthmus: Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas and Tabasco, together with parallel processes in the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America.

In order to support this industrial and urban development plan, the Puebla Panama Plan proposes rural industrialization through tree plantations, cattle corridors, extensive coffee plantations and exploitation of the biogenetic resources of medicinal plants and native crops such as bean, maize and chili, by creating transgenic seeds.

Disguised under the discourse of sustainability, a series of biological corridors stretch from Central America to Mexico, reaching their maximum expansion in Chiapas, where they cross the tourism corridors of the Maya Route, and later continue through Veracruz and Oaxaca to the North, crossing the Zoque forest.

The corridors are devised to control access to the natural resources and territories of indigenous peoples, install bioprospection centres in zones with high biological diversity and create tourism corridors. The Puebla Panama Plan starts this year 2002. All past megaprojects are kept in the current agenda, as well as many others which have not yet been made public. Official reports are more chilling than silence.

One question still remains: where is the social agenda of the Puebla Panama Plan? Does it include a solution for the old agrarian conflicts? In reality, it appears that more conflicts will arise by expelling the people from those areas through which industrial corridors, superhighways and biological corridors will run.

The territorial rights of indigenous peoples, the collective control of natural resources and community self-management are still standing alternatives for Los Chimalapas.

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