
Costa Rica: Opposition to hydroelectric dam

Some years ago, geologists from the Aluminium Company of America (ALCOA) found that important bauxite deposits were present in the subsoil of the El General Valley in Costa Rica. In 1970, the country's Legislative Assembly passed law No. 4562, relative to an industrial contract whereby ALCOA has (or had, we still do not know), the right to exploit, for 25 years and with a possible 15 year extension, a volume of up to 120 million tons of bauxite and the obligation to install an aluminium refinery in the same Canton.

Aluminium foundries require a great quantity of low-cost electric energy. The project was feasible provided a hydroelectric dam were to be built on the Rio Grande de Terraba. For this purpose the river would be dammed to form an artificial lake over an area of 250 square kilometres at its highest level.

This "Borruca" dam triggered off a series of movements of Costa Rican citizens against what they considered to be the violation of and putting at serious risk enormous extensions of the national territory.

On a national level, several protests were made that obliged ALCOA to desist in their project. But the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) has refurbished the objectives of the hydroelectric mega-project. Yesterday, it was to provide electricity to Costa Rica and some Central American countries, today it is to supply for Mexican and some South American needs. In the event that it were to be implemented, it would be the largest hydroelectric project in Central America, with a production capacity of 1,500 megawatts, more than all the hydroelectric projects in Costa Rica together (see WRM bulletin No. 46 of May 2001).

The mega-project --requiring a multimillionaire investment of 3 billion dollars financed by Canadian capital-- involves the flooding of 25,000 hectares of land belonging to the indigenous territories of Boruca, Cabagra, Rey Curré, Salitre, Térraba and Ujarrás among others. As a result, thousands of members of these communities would have to be moved to other parts of the country, adding to the long list of peoples displaced by hydroelectric projects throughout the world. Seven indigenous reserves would also be affected, covering 20% of the total area of the basin, in addition to archaeological deposits and important pre-Columbian settlements.

The Boruca Project will accelerate deterioration of soils, vegetation and the hydraulic regime, due to the promotion it will give to the building of highways and roads on lands that are not apt for agriculture in general and due to the displacement of the population in the reservoir depression, the stimulation of migration towards the zone, speculation over private land and national reserves and destructive exploitation of forests by logging companies.

For almost 30 years, the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) has had a camp within the lands of the Brunca indigenous people, in what is presently the indigenous territory of Rey Curré. Over all this time, the Brunca have been mere witnesses of the movements in this place, but now they are talking. And they say that ICE acts in bad faith when it states that they agree to abandon their lands. And that

it certainly must have used the attendance sheets that they signed in good faith at the meetings they were invited to by representatives of the institution, to prove that there was majority agreement by the indigenous peoples to leave these lands.

The Brunca say “Did the emissaries of power think that the ‘docile Indians’ would be willing to leave the bones of our ancestors, our plantations and our humble homes? They underestimated us because they did not know us (and they still do not know us) because the god that inspires them has made them overbearing. The spirit of all our ancestors, the mountains and the river, the air and the landscape have no price. They have not realised yet that there are things that money and manipulation cannot buy. But they live and breathe for the god of money, they cannot understand. That is why they treat us this way.”

And for this reason, the Brunca defend their right to “not answer what they want to hear...”