
Guatemala: Shrimp-farm generates violence and death

Fisherfolk from the Pacific Ocean port of Champerico are currently fighting for their livelihoods against the shrimp farming firm Camarones S.A. (Camarsa) and its subsidiary Pesca S.A.

Although Camarsa has been operating in the area since 1959, it was only in 1995 --with the arrival of the new owner Domingo Moreira-- that the conflicts arose, including the closure of access to the wetlands used by the local fisherfolk --with a fence--, thus preventing them access to their traditional fishing grounds.

The situation eventually led to a meeting with Camarsa representatives at the beginning of May this year, where the local people requested the firm to remove the fence. No agreement was reached and as a result, some five hundred fisherfolk immediately decided to break the fence at three different places. Three fishermen were arrested by the police and the rest took a company representative hostage offering to exchange him for the release of the three arrested.

After a long negotiation, the authorities agreed to release those arrested and the company representative was set free by the local people. But almost immediately the company's security guards and the police charged against the demonstrators and killed 14-year-old Moytin Castellanos. Four other fishermen were also wounded by firearms.

This is not the first time that local fisherfolk are wounded by firearms. Local Champerico firemen have reported that during the past four years they have treated at least five cases of fishermen wounded by the company's security guards. They also report of many cases of people injured by "mezquite", a thorny plant used by the company to prevent access to the wetlands and shrimp ponds.

According to statements made to the local press by the affected people, the company pays miserable salaries and has appropriated a space which it does not own. Additionally, it has closed the access to public wetlands, which they use to feed their families. The local NGO Trópico Verde has found evidence that the company is operating illegally, because of not having complied with the legal requirement of carrying out environmental impact studies. Additionally, the company has for years been clear-cutting mangrove areas, which is prohibited by the 1996 Forestry Law.

After the serious confrontation that resulted in the death of Moytin Castellanos, the Champerico Human Rights Attorney established a negotiating committee integrated by the Governor of the Province of Champerico, the commanding officer of the Air Force, the Human Rights Attorney, six representatives and a lawyer for the shrimp farming company and thirty two fisherfolk representatives as well as Trópico Verde.

The negotiating process within the above commission broke off on May 21, when the Camarsa delegates demanded that the fisherfolk should prove the damages caused to the wetlands by its activities. On the following day, hundreds of fish appeared dead in one of the wetlands used by Camarsa. The fisherfolk fear that the company may have poisoned the water with some chemical and they sent samples of water and fish to several laboratories.

Camarsa is currently spending large amounts of money in the press accusing the fisherfolk for breaking off the negotiations, while at the same time disseminating a video on the Champerico confrontations where the fisherfolk are portrayed as criminals.

The situation is now very tense in Champerico. New demonstrations are being organized by the fisherfolk and local people fear the police may again violently repress the demonstrators.

Article based on information from: "Disturbios en Champerico producidos por una camaronera. Un menor de edad resulta muerto por la policía". Trópico Verde, 10 May 2001; Update by Trópico Verde 23 May.