
Guatemala: Actions to defend natural reserve against oil exploitation

The Maya Biosphere Reserve in the region of Petén has been at the centre of a strong dispute where peasant communities, Guatemalan and international NGOs, the national government and oil companies are involved. The problem started in 1997 when the government put out to tender for oil exploitation an area of 300,000 hectares belonging to this Reserve, part of which comprises a territory which has been traditionally used by local communities. On February 1999 Guatemalan concerned organizations issued a strong declaration where the situation was denounced and a definitive solution was demanded (see WRM Bulletin 21).

The company Basic Resources International, that benefits with a contract in the area, is being heavily questioned for the illegality of the contract and for the environmental impact of its operations. Until now there have been 32 wells drilled and 120 km of oil pipelines have been constructed in the "Laguna del Tigre" National Park of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. The refinery "La Libertad" is situated close to the protected zone.

The National Congress is revising another contract of Basic Resources International due to probable economic damage for the country. The Presidential Secretary for the Environment, Haroldo Quej Chen; the Presidential Commissioner for the Environment, Jorge Cabrera; the Human Rights Attorney, Julio Arango, the members of the Environmental Commission of the Congress of the Republic and the civilian population of Petén organized in ACOFOP, SUCHILMA, COCHICLE and CLOROFILA (timber associations and gum and pepper harvesters the first three, and environmentalist the fourth), have demanded the suspension of Basic's operations in Petén.

Basic Resources has now taken the offensive, facing up to the growing questioning against its operations in Guatemala. Rodolfo Sosa, president of the company, accused Oilwatch and Hivos of leading a campaign against the activities of his company, with the purpose of stopping its activities, acting as "the enemies of Basic", and has started a publicity campaign trying to show that the company's activities are environmentally friendly.

But sectors of the Guatemalan society have reacted. On January this year, the organization Colectivo Madre Selva expressed that the zone "is suffering the effects that the oil company activity provokes: opening of roads, dynamite explosions, chemical mud, poisonous gases, contamination of water, soil and air, colonization of the area and environmental, social and sanitary degradation." Last March a group of concerned citizens went to Court to object to an appeal lodged by Basic Resources International, arguing that the company is causing irreparable damage to the ecosystem, and that the Maya Biosphere Reserve is an inheritance not only of today's Guatemalans, but of generations to come. If the Court approves the company's appeal, it would mean the granting of additional exploration and exploitation rights in 192,233 hectares within the National Park. Petitioners claim that the process is illegal, since when the contract was signed, the Law of Protected Areas and the Maya Biosphere Reserve Law already existed.

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