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## Forest reserve under threat in Venezuela

In an open letter addressed to the President of Venezuela, dated May 17, a group of 20 environmental groups and a large number of prominent citizens, have denounced gross abuse of power and deceitful manipulation of public opinion, in order to approve in Cabinet a management plan for Imataca Forest Reserve, a legally protected area since the early 1960s. Imataca, situated at the foot of the Guayana Shield, occupies an area of 3.6 million hectares -the size of the Netherlands- and is covered with rich, pristine tropical forests. It is also rich in mineral resources, as well as water, energy and biodiversity. Part of the area is also home to the indigenous nations Warao, Karina, Akawaio and Pemon, whose survival and cultural legacy depends on this environment. Under pressure of the powerful international mining lobby, greedy for the large deposits of gold and diamonds located at Imataca, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Mines prepared a management plan for the reserve, that was presented to the public -as required by law- on May 7. But most of the selected group of organizations invited to this presentation received the document the day before! Even the Government of the State of Bolivar, within whose jurisdiction lies most of the reserve, received it two days before, and was not consulted during the whole process. Even though it was agreed that the participants would have until May 30 to present their observations, surprisingly the Cabinet of Ministers approved the plan on May 14.

The plan has received numerous criticisms, due to its deficiencies and omissions in relation to respecting previous legislation for Protected Areas, recognizing territorial and fundamental rights of indigenous communities who have inhabited this territory since ancestral times, the ban on forestry and mining activities in Protected Areas, accepting and enhancing the participation of local populations, environmental groups and other citizen organizations in the process. "The Management Plan for the Forest Reserve of Itacama violates Presidential Decree 2.214, represents an erroneous step with dangerous consequences for this reserve, as well as for other forest reserves in the country. It also contravenes international agreements signed by Venezuela related to the conservation and rational management of forest resources, the protection of biological diversity, and the recognition and respect of basic human rights" states Prof. Centeno.

Source: Julio Cesar Centeno. Universidad de los Andes. Merida. Venezuela.  
June 1997.