

## **Awa people threatened by plywood companies and palm oil industry**

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For the last four years, I have been working in the indigenous people's organization Federación de Centros Awá del Ecuador. The Federation Awa represents the 22 Awa communities in Ecuador. I advise the indigenous Awa people about community forestry, defending their land rights, and about strengthening their organization. I spend nearly all my time with the Awa.

The Awa are indigenous people, who live in the north-western Ecuador (in the provinces of Esmeraldas, Imbabura and Carchi, with around 3,700 people) and in south-western Colombia (Departamento de Nariño und Putumayo with around 15,000 people, currently a hotspot for coca production and violent between armed groups - reported, aerial spraying with Roundup has just commenced again). The Awa territory is threatened in both countries by logging companies and rapid land clearance for palm oil plantations.

In Ecuador, the Awa have a territory of around 115,000 hectares, the last large remainder of the lowland rainforest along Ecuador's coast (part of the Chaco biome and a biodiversity hotspot). In 2006, after 30 years of struggle, official land titles have been granted by the government to the Awa people. In Esmeraldas, Cantón San Lorenzo alone, right up to the Awa lands, 45,000 hectares of land have been cleared by palm oil companies since 1999. The government has officially backed the palm oil producers through an presidential decree, which declared 60,000 hectares of primary and secondary forests (including a small part of the Awa territory and 6.000 ha of the protected State Forest Heritage) for agricultural use, but it will probably be an even larger area.

The land and the forest used to belong to Afro-Ecuadorean villages. In Ecuador, the Afro-Ecuadoreans are classed as indigenous people and are constitutionally protected - on paper. Most of those former villagers are now landless and without income and sufficient food supply. The Awa have so far resisted loggers and palm oil plantation companies.

Recently, a few land speculators have challenged the legitimate land titles of the Awa and have already had their first success. The environment ministry has just taken 17,500 hectares away from the Awa and has granted land rights to a Co-Management with Afro-Ecuadoreans. They have never lived there, and the Awa will not abandon the five villages concerned. It is likely that the conflict will end in violence.

Behind this land conflict are the logging and palm oil companies. The Awa and Afro-Ecuadoreans have been living peacefully together so far. Some of the logging companies are owned by the same people as the palm oil companies: Plywood Ecuatoriana and CODESA (Alvarez Barba Group), have personal and financial relations to the largest palm oil firm in Ecuador, Industrias Ales, for example, work hand in hand. First, the logging companies cut all useable timber, then the palm oil companies flatten the rest and convert the land to plantations.

With the "biofuel" boom in the US and Europe the situation is worsening. Right now, the "biodiesel" refinery of the La Fabril group in the harbour town of Manta is being expanded to process 100,000 tonnes for export to the US and to Europe, and the industry plans to expand palm oil production by 50% in the coming five years. Germany is the biggest producer and consumer of "biodiesel" in the world.

The German – Ecuadorian Chamber of Industry and Commerce even writes: "With respect to biodiesel, Ecuador is second largest palm oil producer in Latin America and has 207 thousand hectares of culture. Nevertheless, the plant could be cultivated up to a million hectares".

For more information (in Spanish) see the website.

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