

Biobío River: Chilean Government Renews Ralco Dam Concession

In the Spring 1995 issue of Abya Yala News we reported that ENDESA, the largest private company in Chile, is planning to construct six hydroelectric dams on the Biobío river in southern Chile. The first of these, Pangué, is already 70% completed. ENDESA now says it will move ahead with construction of the largest of the Biobío dam, called Ralco. Ralco threatens to displace 700 people, including 400 Pehuenche Indians. Since our last article, the struggle to save Biobío and the lands of the Pehuenche has been intense. Now, the Chilean state has broken down a barrier for the construction of Ralco.

On January 12, 1995, ENDESA announced that despite opposition by citizen groups and Indigenous people, members of the Chilean Congress, and even some government agencies, the office of the Inspector General of Chile had approved the renewal of ENDESA's provisional concession for surveying in the Ralco area of the Upper Biobío. The opposition to the renewal had caused the normally automatic renewal process to be delayed for nearly a year.

The groups opposed the renewal because of the negative impact of the surveying work on the ecology of the Upper Biobío and the Pehuenche Indigenous communities who live in the area. Ralco would be a 155 meter-high dam with a 3,400 hectare reservoir, which would flood over 70 km of the river valley and displace over 700 people, including 400 Pehuenche Indians. Environmental and Indigenous rights groups oppose the project not only because of the wide scale destruction it would cause, but also because projections of Chile's future energy requirements indicate that the energy it would produce will not be needed.

ENDESA has been continuously conducting surveying activities in the area, despite the fact that their original provisional concession expired in 1993, and their activities have consistently been carried out without the consent of the land owners. The opposition groups

hold that while Ralco's impacts have not been evaluated or approved by the appropriate government agencies, ENDESA should not be permitted to continue to bring destructive elements to the Ralco area.

Under Chilean Law (Law of Protection, Support, and Development of Indigenous People), the Pehuenche Indians are not required to leave their lands against their will nor to accept any relocation package offered by ENDESA. The Pehuenche have made clear their opposition to the Ralco project and the presence of ENDESA representatives in their territory, but the concession will enable ENDESA representatives to move through the Pehuenche Indians' territory against their wishes.

Opposition to the granting of the permit has been widespread. On January 19, a press conference was held to criticize the decision to renew the claim. A declaration was signed there by the major environmental groups and by youth organizations of the political parties in the governing coalition of Chile. Also, the Chilean Bureau of Indian Affairs (Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena-- CONADI), recently created to implement Chile's new Indigenous Peoples Law, intervened against ENDESA.

The Pehuenche communities in the path of Endesa's project have had to contend with a well-orchestrated campaign of mis-information and bribery. Some

were misled by Endesa into selling their lands. Others have resisted actively, asking Endesa engineers to vacate their communities immediately: "Since it has not been possible to discuss things with ENDESA, and due to the assault that our Mapuche Pehuenche people are being subjected to, we feel forced to take the decision to ask them to leave Pehuenche territory, out of the communities of Quepuca-Ralco, Palmucho, Quepuca, Ralco-Lepoy, Lepoy, La Veta, Chenqueco..." (Werken (chiefs) of Quepuca-Ralco and Ralco Lepoy).

Write to the President Chile, Eduardo Frei and to the diplomatic representatives of Chile in your own country, asking them to respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Chile in accordance with the Chilean Indigenous Peoples Law and International Treaties:

Eduardo Frei, Presidente de la Republica de Chile; Fax: +56-2-690-4020 or +56-2-690-4329; <http://www.presidencia.cl/>; John Biehl, Chilean Ambassador to the United States; Fax: 202-887-5579

Compiled from Corrientes, newsletter of the Biobío Action Group (GABB), and Biobío updates (translated by IRN). For More information, contact: Grupo de Accion por el Biobío, Ernesto Pinto Lagarrigue 112, Recoleta, Santiago de Chile; Tel:+56-2-737-1420; Fax: +56-2-777-6414; email: gabb@huelen.reuna.cl