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BOLIVIA: Indigenous people fight for forest

An alliance among local communities, Indigenous groups and non-governmental organizations faces off against a major logging company.

◆ —by *Jaime Grant* | REPRINTED FROM NOTICIAS ALIADAS, VOL. 35, NO. 5, FEB. 12, 1998

In a bid to protect their livelihoods, the Indigenous communities of the Pilon Lajas Indigenous Territory and Biosphere Reserve in Bolivia's northern Beni department have united against one of the area's biggest logging companies. The Chimane, Mosekene and Tacana peoples have joined forces with the Rurrenabaque municipal government and Veterinarians Without Borders (VSF), a French NGO which oversees administration of Pilon Lajas, to ban the Berna logging company from the reserve.

"We want the authorities to throw out the logging companies, so they leave the territory for good,"

"THE SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF THE PILÓN LAJAS AREA, DESIGNATED AS AN INDIGENOUS TERRITORY AND BIOSPHERE RESERVE IN 1991, DEPENDS ON WHETHER OR NOT THE LOGGING INDUSTRY IS CONTROLLED"

or not the logging industry is controlled," said Daniel Robinson, national coordinator of VSF. Bolivia's forest reserves are considered among the world's richest, with more than 2,500 species of trees.

The coalition against Berna say that the company, along with hoards of independent loggers, is steadily deforesting the supposedly protected area. "They are tearing out various timber species, mainly mahogany, and selling them for excellent prices," Soto said. In addition, Mosetene representative Macario Canare said, "For every mahogany trunk they take out, they cut down 70 more trees getting to it."

Logging also threatens traditional hunting grounds on which Indigenous communities depend for their livelihood. "The loggers hunt animals in the jungle for food, and the sound of their machines scares many more away," Canare said.

Bolivia's forestry law, passed in 1996, allows the government to lease forests to private companies in 40-year concessions, providing regulations governing sustainable forest management are fol-

lowed. The law gives Indigenous people the exclusive right to use forest resources on communal land in territory reserved for Indigenous groups. Protected areas include more than 9.5 million hectares, while Indigenous areas amount to about 1 million hectares. In contrast, more than 21 million hectares have been granted in forestry concessions (NA July 18, 1996).

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"The lumber companies and independent loggers are taking away trees that we have title to, without giving anything in return to the communities," Soto said. Robinson and the Indigenous peoples of Pilon Lajas argue that local communities should at least get a percentage of loggers' profits. The Indigenous communities have created a precedent of resistance and some headway has been made in defending Pilon Lajas. In 1996, VSF sued the Bella Vista and El Pino logging companies for working without contracts, and they were forced to suspend operations, the first time such action had ever been taken. A third company, Selva Negra, left the area voluntarily.

Berna, the largest company remaining in Pilon Lajas, is proving hard to dislodge. Robinson said VSF lawyers have "extensive evidence that the company's logging practices do not comply with the forestry law." For example, Berna has not begun the reforestation program detailed in its original contract, and its employees continue to hunt for food, although hunting is prohibited.

"It is everyone's fervent hope that Berna will be thrown out, but they are very powerful here," Robinson said. The logging industry is important to the local economy, and

many people want Berna to stay.

Rurrenabaque, a frontier settlement on the Beni River, thrives on the extraction of mahogany from Pilon Lajas. Most of the town is built from second-rate mahogany, and it is an open secret that the local sawmill cuts illegally harvested wood into commercial planks.

Despite its shortcomings, the new forestry law has started to control the flow of wood from the area. By allowing people to make a living from logging, but regulating the industry through forest inventories and extraction plans, the area could have a more sustainable future. "People have realized that by limiting their output they can still make good money. Since the volume has dropped in Rurrenabaque, the price of lumber has almost doubled," Robinson said. But these small advances are threatened by large-scale, unsustainable operations like Berna's in Pilon Lajas.

"If [Berna] isn't thrown out, then the whole thing will fall through. Independent loggers will say, 'If they're not going to make the big guys leave the protected areas, then why should we [leave]?' Robinson said.

Despite the obstacles, the Indigenous communities in Pilon Laja are determined to protect the reserve. "It's our right to protect our territory," Canare said. "If we can't control it, and if this logging doesn't stop, we lose the future we are fighting for."



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