

COLOMBIA

Plan Pacífico Threatens to Destroy Untouched Rainforest

Embera, Waunana and Awa Peoples Defend El Choco



Along Colombia's Pacific coast lies one of the most biologically diverse tropical rainforest regions left on Earth. Known as El Choco, this verdant terrain has, until recently, managed to escape the nefarious claws of development with 83% of the forest still intact. But now the Embera, Waunana and Awa peoples who have lived in harmony with the environment for millennia are facing a massive government development program for El Choco known as the Plan Pacífico.

Mangrove forests line the coast while tropical rainforests pervade inland. Above the treeline, the distinct alpine shrub land known as the Páramo adds to the array of complex ecosystems. A massive river network connects the rainforests to the Pacific ocean. El Choco contains more insect species and two and a half time more bird species than all of North America. One hectare contains more tree species than the whole of the British Isles..

In the last ten years this haven of biodiversity and life, has been "discovered". El Choco is now regarded by multinational corporations and governments as a "gold mine" for its abundance of tropical hardwoods, potential for oil, gold, and other minerals, and hydroelectric dam potential. Plan Pacífico would include a network of roads, hydroelectric facilities, new ports and a land-bridge linking Pacific and Caribbean coast with hopes of competing with the Panama Canal. A naval port has already been completed and has militarized the zone and displaced traditional fishing communities in Malaga Bay.

Approximately 110,000 Indigenous people live in El Choco from eleven different tribal groups. The dominant nations are the Embera, Waunana and Awa. They have been driven from their traditional lands and live in

isolated groups throughout the region. As a result of a long struggle, the Indigenous people have won legal title to 64 "resguardos" which cover approximately five percent of El Choco.

In an attempt to salvage their "home" and way of life the Indigenous people, through the Ebera-Wauana Regional Organization (OREWA), have united on various occasions with Afro-Colombians, who make up the majority in the region, to block illegal activities such as logging by multinationals. In 1992 they successfully blockaded construction of the Pan American Highway and forced the government to negotiate with OREWA and pay for an OREWA designed environmental impact assessment of the road.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which has assisted people in the Choco region since 1975 has now withdrawn funding for the Cultural Survival Canada (CUSO)-OREWA partnership program, a viable and successful series of projects that have significantly empowered the people in of the Choco.

Please write the two responsible Canadian ministers to urge that funding be restored to the CUSO-OREWA project in Colombia:

The Hon. Barbara MacDougall
Minister of External Affairs
Lester Pearson Building
Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Canada

The Hon. Monique Vezina
Minister for CIDA
Promenade de Portage
Phase 4
Hull, Canada

