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## Chile's Indigenous Groups Fight Growing Development

by LADB Staff

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On Feb. 23, a Chilean judge ordered more than 400 Mapuche Indians off the 560-hectare Fundo El Rincon owned by Forestal Mininco. The dispute is one of 55 between Chile's Indian communities and forestry companies. In another dispute that has indigenous groups and environmentalists confronting developers, the Pehuenche Indians are battling to block construction of a huge dam on the Bio-Bio River. The Mapuches had occupied El Rincon property, located in the municipality of Puren, 620 km south of Santiago, for 10 days before Judge Jorge Ulloa issued the eviction order. The Mapuches claim the land was theirs until the 1970s, when it was illegally expropriated during the military dictatorship (1973-90).

Judge Ulloa also ordered the arrest of Mapuche leaders in the Juan Maril community believed responsible for the land takeover. In its complaint against the Mapuches, Mininco says the Indians have cut more than six ha of forest for firewood. Mininco also alleges that a Mapuche religious celebration resulted in several small fires that burned two ha of company land. The complaint said when firefighters arrived, the Indians would not let them cross Mapuche-owned property to fight the fire.

Early in 1998, the Mapuches said they intended to increase their efforts to recover land taken from them during the nineteenth-century occupation of Araucania by Chilean government troops. They said the occupation violated several treaties they signed with the Spanish crown during the colonial period. President Eduardo Frei's administration has distributed land purchased from private companies to a number of Mapuche communities. The Mapuches, however, say the government is not doing enough. They have filed several lawsuits demanding the return of their lands, and they have occupied property they say belongs to them.

Government efforts to negotiate a solution to the conflict have centered on the possible purchase of 260 ha of the Fundo El Rincon by the state agency responsible for indigenous affairs (Corporacion Nacional de Desarrollo Indigena, CONADI). A price of US\$1.2 million has apparently been negotiated, although company officials say they will not sell any property while it is being illegally occupied by the Mapuches. CONADI official Carlos Vargas said that with more than 55 contested land disputes between indigenous people and area forestry companies, his agency lacks sufficient funds to resolve each dispute.

### *Conservationists and Pehuenche oppose dam*

Meanwhile, another indigenous group, the Pehuenche, has clashed with the government regarding plans to build a dam on the Bio-Bio River. Twenty Pehuenche families are fighting to stop construction of the giant dam on the 384-km river in southern Chile that is their ancestral home. The opposition has delayed construction of the US\$480 million Ralco Dam, but backers of the dam may be making headway. More than 70 other families who would be flooded out by the dam recently agreed to move, won over by offers of new homes and cash. Construction of the dam has become one of Latin America's most high-profile environmental battles, pitting conservationists against

proponents of large-scale development projects, and the arguments about costs and benefits of large dams has taken on international dimensions.

The 570-megawatt Ralco Dam, scheduled for completion in 2002, would provide 18% of the electricity needs for central Chile, including Santiago. Chile's growing population and expanding economy are making new energy sources more urgent, and hydroelectric power is touted as the most economic source for that energy. But environmentalists, including the US-based International Rivers Network, say the dam would periodically flood large areas of land, including the homes of 385 Pehuenches and their ancient burial grounds.

Juan Pablo Orrego, head of Chile's Grupo de Accion por el Bio-Bio, said the dam would also destroy rare species of flora and fauna. Recent studies at the University of Concepcion predict a drastic loss in fishing productivity in the coastal areas where the Bio-Bio empties into the Pacific, Orrego said. To stop the dam, the Indians are relying on Chile's 1993 Indigenous Law, which says native land cannot be sold or taken over, although it can be traded with the Indians' consent. Any such deals would have to be approved by CONADI, whose director, Domingo Namuncura, is skeptical of the project. "The dam will only provide energy for 50 years, while the Indians may be subjected to a sudden and irreversible change in their culture," said Namuncura. "Future generations may look back and think this was stupid."

Managers of Endesa, the dam builders, remain optimistic that the dam will be completed. "We are spending US\$20 million on relocation," says Cristian Maturana, head of the Ralco project. "We'll get the cooperation we need." Endesa has already built one dam on the Bio-Bio, several miles downriver from Ralco. But construction on the Pangué Dam, which received World Bank funding, began in 1993, just before the Indigenous Law was approved.

An independent study released in August 1997 was highly critical of the International Finance Corporation, a private-sector arm of the World Bank, for the Pangué Dam. The report said the IFC ignored World Bank policies, failing to adequately compensate affected families or to identify and monitor environmental impacts. Ralco would be five times bigger nearly 150 meters high- -affecting much more land and many more Indians. [World Rivers Review, August 1997; CHIP News (Chile), Inter Press Service, 02/23/98; El Nuevo Herald, 02/24/98; Miami Herald, 03/02/98]

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