4-12-2000

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Recommended Citation
U.S. Foundation Awards Environmental Prize To Imprisoned Campesino Leader Who Opposed Logging In Guerrero State

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2000-04-12

The California-based Goldman Foundation has awarded its prestigious Environmental Award to imprisoned campesino leader Rodolfo Montiel Flores, who has defied efforts by multinational paper company Boise Cascade to cut down several tracts of forest in the western state of Guerrero. The award, one of six presented annually, is intended to give environmental activists the "recognition, visibility, and credibility their efforts deserve," the foundation said. In 1998, Montiel formed the Organizacion de Campesinos Ecologistas de la Sierra de Petatlan y Coyuca de Catalan (OCESPCC) to prevent Costa Grande Forest Products, the Mexican subsidiary of Boise Cascade, from cutting down forests in a region of the Sierra Madre del Sur known as Filo Mayor. Flores said the OCESPCC became concerned because massive logging was causing area rivers and streams to dry up. To protest the cutting of the forest, members of the OCESPCC began to form human chains to block logging trucks, sometimes threatening to burn the vehicles and their cargo of old-growth pine and fir.

These actions of civil disobedience slowed Costa Grande's logging operations but infuriated wealthy landowners, who were deprived of royalties. The landowners then enlisted the assistance of local military and law-enforcement officials, who moved against the OCESPCC. Several members of the organization were killed by masked assailants during 1998 and 1999. In May 1999, authorities arrested Montiel and fellow OCESPCC member Teodoro Cabrera on fabricated drug charges. In the arrest order, the military and local police said Montiel and members of his group were protecting marijuana and poppy fields and not the local forests. Montiel has also been accused of belonging to the guerrilla group Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR), a charge he has denied. The charges against Montiel and Cabrera, although filled with inconsistencies and contradictions, have been sufficient to send the two OCESPCC members to the federal penitentiary in Iguala, Guerrero state, pending a felony trial. Montiel has accused authorities of torturing him in prison.

Case gains widespread international attention
The Goldman Foundation award brought international attention to Montiel's case, which had received little or no publicity outside Guerrero state. In early April, the international human rights organization Amnesty International declared Montiel a prisoner of conscience. The group joined the environmental organization Sierra Club and Mexican human rights group Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez to demand the immediate release of Montiel and Cabrera. In a letter to President Ernesto Zedillo, the three organizations reminded the executive of the Mexican government's recent statement to the UN's Human Rights Commission in Geneva that the protection of human rights would be the "central theme" for Mexico in the 21st Century. "One clear signal that Mexico is serious about this [commitment] made in Geneva is for authorities to guarantee that civil society can freely and peacefully exercise its rights to conserve and defend the environment," the letter said.

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Government spokesman David Najera told The New York Times that Zedillo was unaware of the details of Montiel's case. "But it worries us, and we'll focus on it now," Najera said. He emphasized that Zedillo's government would examine the case in light of its commitment to promote respect for the environment. Meanwhile, Montiel has announced he will donate the US$125,000 prize from the Goldman Foundation to the Fundacion Alvaro Umana to promote irrigation projects. (Sources: Associated Press, The New York Times, 04/05/00; El Financiero, La Jornada, 04/06/00; El Universal, 04/07/00; Proceso, 04/09/00; Reforma, 04/06/00, 04/10/00)

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