

Belen Paez: Director of the Pachamama Foundation (Fundación Pachamama, Ecuador)

22.05.2014

Over the past 16 years, the [Pachamama Foundation](#) has been working for the conservation of tropical forests and the respect of the rights of indigenous communities. We have supported more than 30 communities, working for the recognition and respect of their rights. As part of achieving this, we have advocated for legislative advances, most notably successfully lobbying in 2008 for the inclusion of the rights to nature in the Constitution. Ecuador is the first country in the world ever to do so.



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However, in December 2013 the Foundation was shut down by a ministerial accord citing Decree N°16 which regulates NGO activity in Ecuador. There was no warning - the police arrived and closed the office down. We were accused of 'interfering in public policy, threatening the internal security of the State and affecting the public peace'. This is the first time in Ecuador's history that an NGO has been shut down in this way.

We believe we were targeted because we are an organization of activists that is visible, vocal and effective. We had recently been protesting peacefully against the government's policy of pushing the 'petrol frontier' further into the Amazon rainforest, through further hydrocarbon exploitation. Pachamama has been effective in raising awareness about the destructive impact of this policy on local indigenous communities such as the Kichwa community of Sarayaku. By closing us down, they hope to fracture the indigenous rights movement in the region.

With our requests to meet with officials from the Ministry of the Environment rejected, we have been forced to take the judicial route and request 'amparo' (remedy for the protection of constitutional rights). Our first request was rejected and we fear our second one - to a higher court - will be too. We are very conscious that credible and independent judicial processes no longer exist in the country. For this reason we are looking to regional and international human rights mechanisms, as we continue to pursue justice nationally.

At the most recent Inter-American Commission public session, we participated in a hearing on freedom of association in Ecuador. We wanted to raise awareness about the restrictions civil society is facing currently in Ecuador, and the arbitrary ways in which the State is operating. We asked the Commission President to request a visit to the region to see the situation for herself. However, we are not confident this will happen. Last year the Commission put in a request for a visit to the Ecuador government and got no response.

We also engage internationally because it's important that international human rights mechanisms hear from defenders directly. International human rights instruments support our work, and can influence State decision - making regionally and nationally. International human rights law goes beyond the term of any one government. It provides a road map for deepening democracy and upholding the respect of human rights in the medium and long-term.

In Ecuador we fear that the government is winning its campaign to discredit social movements, defenders and indigenous communities. They do this through use of the media, and through bribing indigenous communities with ad hoc benefits which create disinterest and apathy in parts of the movement. Those that work on the conservation of tropical forests have never faced worse risks. Global demand for the resources of Amazonian forests and others on the Equator - in the Congo and Indonesia, for example - is intense. We need to document the cases of these defenders and communities to show the pressures they face. There are powerful interests that want to ensure that defenders and those who live in these forests lose their voice and capacity to resist.

To take action for Pachamama, defenders and indigenous communities in Ecuador go to: Fundación Pachamama: <http://pachamama.org.ec/>, Amazon Watch 'Show Solidarity with Fundación Pachamama': <http://bit.ly/1oiC1aK>

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