

## Marine pollution

## Fight over, but war goes on

Chilean communities unite to fight for their livelihood rights against big business interests represented by a giant pulp firm

Saturday, 9 September 2006, was to have been a big fiesta day in Mehuín, a coastal town in southern Chile, home to a small fishing community of approximately 1,700 people. However, poor weather conditions put paid to that plan. Instead, the Mehuín Union of Women Workers was forced to limit its cultural events to a small gathering in the offices of the fishermen's union.

A few weeks earlier, on Tuesday, 15 August, fishermen from Mehuín had braved rough seas in their small launches to block vessels chartered by the Chilean industrial giant, the pulp firm called Celulosa Arauco Company (Celco). These had been commissioned to carry out an environmental impact assessment (EIA), a prerequisite for discharging waste from the Valdivia pulp mill into the sea.

According to the Chilean Navy, called in to "ensure the security of human life at sea, to maintain order and security in the maritime zone", the "sea and wave conditions in the area, with waves over 2 m, did not guarantee the safety of operations necessary to carry out these studies".

The Navy report also noted the presence of "several fishing boats, carrying rocks and lances; both these conditions pose risks for human life at sea, so it was decided to postpone work until conditions improve".

The 'Battle of Mehuín' was but a single skirmish in a war that has been waged for over 10 years on many fronts, with much at stake, and with a great amount of collateral damage.

It has been a dirty campaign too, with allegations of complicity, bribery and intimidation. For the moment, there is a

tense ceasefire, but hostilities could be resumed at any moment.

According to Juan Carlos Cardenas, Director of Ecoceanos, an independent, non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Chile, working to promote conservation and sustainable management of coastal and ocean ecosystems, "Local communities face a desperate situation of institutional malfunction, where the authorities have not been even-handed." Given the complete lack of trust in the way environmental regulations are implemented, Cardenas explains that a new strategy is required. "Celco operates an export-oriented industry, requiring international markets. We are making an international appeal to stop this barbarous proposal to discharge toxic waste into an area that is an important fishery. The political fallout could be high," warns Cardenas.

The saga being acted out in Chile's southern regions pits local communities of fishers and indigenous people against the might of Celco. The company, whose consolidated sales represent five per cent of Chile's gross domestic product, is owned by the Angelini family's forestry business, and forms part of the giant Copec Oil Company ([www.copec.cl](http://www.copec.cl)), Chile's largest privately owned company. With consolidated assets worth \$6,432 million, 68 per cent of which form part of their forest ventures, Copec controls around 70 per cent of the Chilean pulp used for newspaper production.

### Large footprint

Celco's Valdivia plant is located in the small commune of San José de la Mariquina, some 800 km south of Santiago, but its footprint is both large and heavy. Production at the plant requires

## The Battle of Mehuín

At 8 a.m. on Tuesday 15 August 2006, Mehuín was awoken by the alarm calls of watchmen on the hills, announcing the arrival of vessels chartered by Celco. Twenty minutes later, Mehuín fishermen were in their boats and on the scene. They were joined by 30 more launches from the *caleta* of Queule, in the South of the IX Region, who also oppose the duct.

In addition to the two large tugboats, the fishermen found themselves facing the Navy patrol vessels *Chiloé* and *Antofagasta*, and a warship with more than 100 marines, including hooded men with weapons ready. All this was filmed on video by the fishermen (see <http://www.mehuín-Celco.blogspot.com/>), and shown in the local community, provoking outrage at the Chilean Navy for its overt support of Celco.

Accounts of the battle vary. Fishermen accuse the Navy of heavy-handed tactics and intimidation, with shots being fired indiscriminately by hooded gunmen. By 5 p.m., thanks to the interference by the fishermen, the two tugboats had withdrawn northwards, and the Navy vessels to Valdivia.

For their part, the Navy claimed that they were called in by the authorities in San José de La Mariquina to maintain safety at sea. An official statement noted that the Navy had been called in to “ensure the safety of the personnel and equipment of Ultragas S.A. while they carry out

the technical investigations necessary to prepare their EIA”.

Eliab Viguera, the spokesperson for the Marine Defence Committee, questioned the role taken by the Navy in the conflict, pointing to the lack of transparency, and the lack of any official announcement prior to their surprise deployment.

Joaquín Vargas, President of the Mehuín Fishermen's Federation, pointed out that the swift action by the fishermen had prevented the environmental impact assessment (EIA) required by Celco being carried out.

“The Celco vessels were 3-5 miles outside the area where they have to carry out their studies. But they should not be allowed to enter there, because it is a management area belonging to the fishermen. We are defending our right to work in a pollution-free environment. It is the role of the State to ensure that, to safeguard the patrimony of all Chileans, as stated in the Constitution.”

According to Vargas, the EIA carries absolutely no guarantees for the fishing community, as the projects are always approved. “Where cellulose plants operate with EIAs, the results are plain to see. Close by, the situation in the Cruces river in Valdivia is a case in point. There used to be swans there, but they have flown away. However, we fishermen have no wings to fly.”

thousands of hectares of pine and eucalyptus plantations, with an annual demand for over 2,000 ha worth of production.

Using 950 l of water per second for fibre whitening, it discharges a similar quantity of liquid residues and byproducts. Its potential impact on local communities, particularly on the indigenous Mapuch, whose traditional livelihoods depend on access to aquatic and forestry resources, is enormous.

The Valdivia plant is seen locally as the tip of the iceberg of a development that will generate widespread misery, environmental destruction and the devastation of Mapuche communities, leading to the displacement of thousands of indigenous people and poor *campesinos*

(farmers or peasants). Back in the 1980s, Celco conceived the ‘Valdivia Project’—the construction of a new cellulose plant, with an investment of US\$1,300 mn. According to Ecoceanos, the installation of the cellulose plant was aided “by government policies that favour the export of raw materials with low value added; that subsidize plantations of exotic species; that protect private investment; that do not recognize the historic rights of indigenous people to the areas where single-species plantations of pine and eucalyptus have been established; and that are blind to the need to protect native woodlands.”

Commenting to the Inter Press Service (IPS), Lucio Cuenca, the Director of the Latin American Observatory for Environmental Conflicts (OLCA),

observed: “In Chile, political decisions continue to take precedence over technical, environmental and social considerations. What we are seeing here is a dictatorship of investments and of power of the big corporations, with the government’s complicity.”

**T**he project was finally approved in 1996, with Celco’s waste disposal options being either to discharge into the Cruces river, or into the sea some 35 km away. Discharging their effluent into the river required the installation of expensive tertiary waste treatment equipment. The cheapest option for Celco was, therefore, to dump its effluents into the sea by constructing a pipeline.

Celco targeted the Bay of Maiquillahue as the place to discharge the factory waste. Around 600 families in Mehuin depend on fishing for their livelihoods. There are also 13 other communities in the surrounding area, comprising some 3,000, mainly indigenous, Mapuche-Lafkenche people, who depend on fishing and farming. The bay area is also a favoured local tourist spot, and fishing and tourism are important local activities, but their future is threatened by the plans to dump toxic waste in the bay.

The planned route for the pipeline goes right through the areas used by the indigenous people and claimed by them

as their traditional territories. Anticipating opposition from local groups, Celco has applied for mineral prospecting rights. This entitles the company to privileged access to these areas, and effectively prevents any other economic, infrastructure or cultural initiatives from coming up. The owners of the land must facilitate the activities of those who are granted such rights. Celco’s objective in gaining these rights is to pre-empt the local communities from doing so and blocking their duct.

Thanks to the combined campaigns and actions of the local communities, indigenous people, NGOs and environmentalists, the implementation of the EIA has so far been blocked, and the pipeline project has not been able to proceed.

On 16 October 2006, Fernando Meza, Chair of the Environmental Committee of the Chilean Chamber of Deputies, declared: “The (Celco) company came to the region promising to generate employment with a clean industry that would promote development... but instead they caused considerable environmental damage to the River Cruces wetlands. Then, not only did they attempt to discharge their waste into the sea, but they also proposed to construct a waste pipe across 30- 40 km of indigenous community territory, which they decided to install without carrying out an

environmental impact study that requires that all those affected be consulted.”

According to local environmentalists, the factory wastes destined for the sea “contain high levels of organochlorides, highly carcinogenic and non-biodegradable chemicals.” They claim that these will accumulate “in the tissues of filter feeding organisms (like the local shellfish resources) and fish, and would then be passed on to the humans who ate them. Due to their toxicity, persistence and bioaccumulation, these head the list of substances that are most noxious to the marine environment.”

Fernando Meza adds: “We know that other, closed-circuit technologies exist that purify the water so that it can be reused as many times as required, rendering it harmless, and this simply requires greater investment. I can’t understand how a company that earns US\$200,000 daily or around 100 mn pesos, does not have the wherewithal to invest and leave everyone in peace, without trying to dump its waste in the sea.

There is no doubt in my mind that this will alter the ecosystem. If heavy metals were found in the organs of swans then it is logical that this will surely happen with the marine fauna. Above all, we have a duty to protect the resources.”

The atmospheric pollution of the plant is also considerable. Ecoceanos reports that the Valdivia plant incinerators produce 12 tonnes of sulphur dioxide daily. When in contact with the constant precipitation of the region, this produces acid rain that pollutes the native forests, plantations, animals and the people who consume the food from the area.

According to Ecoceanos, “Investigations made by the authorities found that bad odours were not the only problem. The plant had absolutely no systems for controlling, reducing or monitoring the gases produced. Moreover, the plant had begun operating in February 2004 with no inspection from the department of public works, without any payment of licence fees, and with no public health authorization, in flagrant disregard of official requirements”. According to

another source, “Celco attempted to enter Mehuín by land and sea in order to carry out their studies, but found an organized community that had managed to make a major part of the public aware of the issue. The government’s action was laid bare to the country and part of the international community. They looked on with concern at the environmental and indigenous conflicts and were able to witness the strong repression carried out in some Mapuche areas. Faced with imminent defeat, the company and the government negotiated a way out of the conflict: to approve the project with the initial alternative proposed in the first project, that of discharging effluents into the Cruces river, using a more modern treatment that would ensure minimal pollution.”

The factory was also found to have several additional waste pipes that were not included in the original EIA, which, according to studies carried out by the Austral University of Chile, contracted by the National Environmental Commission (CONAMA), were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of black necked swans and other animals, fishes, and aquatic plants in the Carlos Anwandter Nature Sanctuary.

This sanctuary covers more than 12,000 acres of wetlands along the Cruces river, and is an area designated as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention (Ramsar Site No. 222). The President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, elected in December 2005, has yet to reveal her hand. Her environmental adviser, Manuel Baquedano, has described the pipeline project as “inevitable”, but the activities of Celco have now become a national issue, and will be subject to the scrutiny of the Chilean Chamber of Deputies.

Fernando Meza questions: “How can anyone decide that dioxins, toxins and all kinds of waste can be dumped in the sea here, but not there? The environment is a continuum and what happens in the north could affect the south. The local authorities have failed to understand that this is a national issue. It is not that we have become crazy about attacking Celco... we would do the same with any company that did not respect the

environmental laws, the communities and their way of life.”

**W**hile locally the combatants are preparing themselves for the next encounter, Juan Carlos Cardenas of Ecoceanos feels that the campaign must also be taken to Europe. “We are working with the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, an organization that has strong ties with Chilean fishing communities and CONAPACH, the National Federation of Artisanal Chilean Fishermen. We plan to provide information to the European Parliament and other democratic bodies, which, along with the provisions of the European Union(EU)-Chile Association Agreement, can be used to challenge Celco in the market place,” he says.

The aims of the EU-Chile Association Agreement include “to encourage conservation and improvement of the environment, prevention of contamination and degradation of natural resources and ecosystems, and rational use of the latter in the interests of sustainable development” (Article 28, Title II, Part III (Co-operation)). Cardenas, therefore, envisages establishing a process for formal dialogue between coastal communities, artisanal fisheries, social organizations and indigenous people in Chile and European civil society organizations, integrated into the work of the EU-Chile Joint

Parliamentary Committee. CELCO’s activities work against the achievement of this objective, and this could lead to a blacklisting of their products in Europe as well as a consumer boycott. As CELCO’s paper products are mainly destined for the export market, a consumer boycott could have a significant effect.

In Chile, the outcome of the work of the Environmental Commission of the Chilean Chamber of Deputies could also play a vital role in influencing what action is taken both locally and in Europe.

Cardenas also identifies the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as a potential ally. “The OECD has been very critical of Chile’s environmental record, where Chile’s environmental and labour standards fall short of the OECD criteria. We plan to put the Celco project before the OECD,” says Cardenas. It remains to be seen whether due process at the national level, and international pressure can be combined to safeguard Chile’s marine environment and the livelihoods and well-being of the current and future generations that depend on it.

This report has been compiled by Brian O’Riordan (briano@scarlet.be) from various sources, including the websites of the Rain Forest Movement ([http://www.americas.org/item\\_29197](http://www.americas.org/item_29197)), Ecoceanos (<http://www.ecoceanos.cl>), Mawida Ngen (<http://mawidangen.blogspot.com/>), José Araya Cornejo (<http://www.wri-irg.org/nonviolence/nvse23-es.htm>) and Conapach ([www.conapach.cl](http://www.conapach.cl))