

RIGHTS: Native People Warn U.N. of Biofuels Disaster
By Haider Rizvi

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 30 (IPS) - Growing demand for biofuels by the world's rich nations is propelling attacks on indigenous people and destroying their lands and forests, according to native leaders attending a three-week international meeting here.

"[There are] increasing human rights violations, displacements and conflicts due to expropriation of ancestral lands and forests for biofuels plantations," said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, chairperson of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Tauli-Corpuz, one of the authors of a new report on the topic, warned that if biofuels expansion continued at the current pace, it was likely that at least 60 million native people would lose their lands and livelihood.

The warning comes amid growing global concern over the current food crisis that has left millions of people across the global south to suffer hunger and starvation.

Experts on agro-economics say biofuels production is largely responsible for the current food shortages and soaring prices. The crisis, according to them, is not going to end unless the rich countries change their energy consumption patterns.

If rich nations stopped biofuels production this year, it would lead to a price decline in corn by about 20 percent and wheat by about 10 percent within the next two years, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute, a think tank in Washington.

In a recent teleconference, Lester Brown, president of the U.S.-based Earth Policy Institute, made similar observations about the impact of biofuels production and consumption.

"Food security will deteriorate further unless leading countries can collectively mobilise to stabilise population and restrict the use of grain to produce automotive fuel," he said.

In his latest research, Brown, an award-winning environmental analyst, points out that the unsustainable use of land and water, as well as trade imbalances among nations, are among the major factors contributing to the present crisis.

"The chronically tight food supply the world is now facing is driven by the cumulative effects of several well-established trends that are affecting both global demand and supply," he said.

On the demand side, some 4 billion people are already struggling to get enough to eat, while at the same time, the amount of grain used for car fuels is also rising immensely, according to Brown.

"Since 2005, this last source of demand has raised the annual growth in world grain consumption from nearly 20 million tonnes to about 50 million tonnes," he said. "Meanwhile, on the supply side, there is little new land to be brought under the plow unless it comes from clearing tropical rain forests in the Amazon and Congo basins, or in Indonesia or the Brazilian Cerrado."

The Institute's research shows that new sources of irrigation water are even more scarce than new land to plow. During the past 50 years, global irrigated land has nearly tripled, expanding from 94 million hectares in 1950 to 276 million hectares in 2000. In other words, the amount of cultivable land is shrinking by 1 percent every year.

Experts working with other international institutions, including the United Nations, agree with Brown's analysis of the current food crisis.

Early this month, a report released by the U.N.'s World Food Programme (WFP) called for rich countries to urgently contribute 500 million dollars to address the issue of food scarcity that has led to riots in a number of countries.

According to the World Bank, at least 33 countries are currently in danger of political destabilisation and internal conflicts driven by rising food prices. Currently, some of these poor countries are facing food price hikes of up to 80 percent.

Robert Watson, the former head of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and chief economist at Britain's Department for Environment, agrees that the global production of food has increased, but notes with concern that "not everyone has benefited" from it.

In a recent statement, Watson blamed governments and private businesses for paying more attention to growth in production than natural resources or food security.

"Continuing with current trends means the Earth's haves and have-nots splitting further apart," he said. "It would leave us facing a world nobody wants to inhabit."

Proponents of the sustainable development model say food-based biofuels production, such as ethanol, promotes single crop agriculture which can lead to further loss of biodiversity and create economic disparities.

In their report to the U.N., indigenous leaders documented numerous cases that illustrate how the surge in biofuels plantations is destroying forests in bio-diverse countries and driving native communities out of their lands.

For example, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Colombia all plan to expand their palm oil plantations despite protests by environmental groups who fear massive destruction of resources that belong to indigenous communities.

Activists say Indonesia's plans for plantations could deprive at least 5 million indigenous peoples of their ancient lands. The situation in Colombia is similar, with hundreds of native communities facing threats to their livelihood from plantations.

In addition to palm oil, big agribusinesses are also moving into indigenous lands to grow sugarcane, soy, corn, manioc and jatopha crops -- all of which can be used as fuel. Activists say due to sugarcane plantations, the Guarani people in Brazil have lost much of their land.

Last year, Brazil and the United States signed an agreement last year to cooperate with each other in the development of biofuels. On Tuesday, U.S. President George W. Bush reiterated his energy policy, saying that biofuels was important for the U.S. to reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

For his part, Brown is particularly concerned about the impact of U.S. policies on the growing food insecurity worldwide, and he is not convinced Washington has any plans to help mitigate the problem.

"I don't think the U.S. has realised the seriousness of the problem we are facing," he told IPS. "I am not sure they have any understanding of what is happening."

Regardless of Washington's stance on biofuels, activists attending the U.N. forum say they are determined to protect their rights.

"The biofuels boom doesn't just have consequences for the environment, global food prices or orang-utans -- it's having a devastating effecting on tribal (indigenous) people too," said Stephen Corry, director of Survival International.

"The companies feverishly promoting this industry have been perfectly willing to push aside tribal people in their hunger for land," he said in a statement.