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In the Name of the Father

Isidro Baldenegro López leads a struggle against logging in the Sierra Madre

BY MICHELLE NIJHUIS

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Isidro Baldenegro López.
Photo: Goldman Environmental Prize.

When Isidro Baldenegro López was growing up in the mountains of central Mexico, his father opposed widespread logging in the forests of the Sierra Madre. He spoke out about the effects of the destruction on the indigenous Tarahumara people, drawing the attention of local crime bosses, who ordered him killed. Baldenegro, while still a boy, witnessed his father's murder. Today, at 38, he is continuing his father's work, risking his own life to protect the forests and people of this rugged mountain range.

In the spectacular canyons and forested uplands of the Sierra Madre, logging and ranching operations often launder drug money, and the area is deeply marked by violence and crime. For more than a decade, Baldenegro has led resistance to logging projects, organizing sit-ins, protests, and human blockades. In 2003, he was abruptly jailed on false charges of arms and drug possession; pressure from international organizations, including Amnesty International, helped

secure his release 15 months later.

Though Baldenegro has since continued his work, threats of violence have exiled him from his community. "It's my deepest wish to return," he says, "but I don't have the least idea when that will happen."

Isidro Baldenegro López was awarded one of six 2005 Goldman Environmental Prizes at a ceremony in San Francisco on April 18. He spoke to *Grist* through a translator.

Q. What are the most serious threats to the forests of the Sierra Madre and the Tarahumara people?

A. The strongest threat right now is that our adversaries have been organizing an intimidation campaign against our *compañeros* in

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the mountains. Whenever they find my companions, they say there are three or four people who could be killed, and regularly mention myself and three others. It's been very difficult for me -- I have not even been able to spend time in my own community since I was released from prison.

Q. How have the people in the Sierra Madre been affected by logging and drug trafficking?

A. We've seen them seriously affected. We've seen a lot of narco-trafficking, a lot of people buying arms -- it's a threat to the humble people who just want to work in the area. The local authorities have been threatened, and there have been murders. It's been hell.

Q. What inspired you to become an advocate for the forests?

A. What has really inspired me is the lack of tranquility, the lack of calm that we're living with. There was a time when I thought, I'm going to leave here. But we couldn't move away from our problems -- we are a big family, so it wasn't feasible to emigrate to other areas. I saw we had to face up to this conflict.

Q. I understand that your father was assassinated because of his opposition to logging. How have you continued your work in the face of such violence?

A. Yes, they killed my father, and there was no one to try his case. There was this bitterness in my heart that stayed after he was murdered, so since that day we've been waiting and looking for a way to confront the situation here. I'm proud that we have achieved something, and I know that we are going to overcome.

Q. What do you consider your greatest success so far?

A. In 2003, our adversaries were preparing to cut down an entire forest [about 21,000 acres]. Some companions and I blocked the road so that the trucks couldn't go by. I also organized a lot of people, and brought them to the [national] capital in a peaceful way, asking the government to pay attention to our request to suspend cutting of the forest. The government accepted that, and suspended the cutting.

Q. You received international attention during your imprisonment in 2003. How did this attention and support help your work?

A. The international support that came to my side helped the community. Even after I was released, it helped the community to feel that they were not alone. Today, we still feel strong and confident that in any demands we make, we have people behind us, supporting us.

Q. I understand you have always insisted on nonviolent resistance -- sit-ins, marches, and human blockades. Why do you consider nonviolence the most effective strategy?

A. For me, violence is like losing patience, acting without thinking well about how to

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Baldenegro helps townspeople paint banners to protest illegal logging.
Photo: Goldman Environmental Prize.

resolve problems, without seeing things for what they are. We have to keep our patience in order to resolve issues.

Q. What is the most pressing issue you and your allies face now?

A. We always think we're about to resolve all our problems, but in the end, that's not what happens. We simply don't know how long we will be in this situation. We're watching the legal process that's now under way in Mexico City, where we have cases pending. Though we haven't lost, we haven't won yet, either.



Michelle Nijhuis is a freelance writer living outside of Paonia, Colo.

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