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VICE-PRESIDENT OF BOTNIA DEFENDS INSTALLATION OF ITS PULP PLANT

“Uruguay did not request the works to be halted”

In a month's time fifty percent of the construction works will have been completed. Finnish government worried about its international image. Trade union on strike

By Nora Veiras
from Helsinki

“Uruguay has not officially requested that the Fray Bentos works be halted. An official request would be needed and, in that case, Botnia could consider it and make a decision”. Annikki Rintala, Vice-President in charge of Communications of the Finnish company provided that answer as the greatest concession she could make vis-à-vis the insistence of the Argentine group of journalists. From the eighth floor of the company's headquarters on the Baltic Sea, she clarified that the company is meeting the foreseen schedule to open the plant at the end of 2007. They believe that in a month's time they will have completed fifty percent of the plant's construction, which is affecting relationships between Argentina and Uruguay. But tension is not only present between the River Plate neighbouring countries: Jukka Uosukainen, Director-General of the Ministry of the Environment, admitted that they are concerned because Finland has the highest standards on the world market as a non polluting country and the conflict with Argentina could have an impact on the former country's international image. To avert any misunderstandings, Uosukainen mentioned that the Minister of the Environment, at a recent meeting in Dubai, invited his Argentine peer, Ginés González García, and the Environment Secretary, Atilio Savino, to hear about Finland's environmental policies but no reply was received.

Botnia organized a visit for journalists with the purpose of showing them that "our way of acting is the same at home and abroad" - summarized Kaisu Annala, Vice-President of the Environmental Area but, by happenstance, the journalist's stay coincided with a massive strike of the paper trade union that represents 200 thousand workers in a country that has just over five million inhabitants (see comments in text box). The strike entailed an additional concern for Botnia executives but did not quench their enthusiasm when the time came to defend the most ambitious project with Finnish capital abroad: 1.1 billion dollars.

Having got used to the Spanish language after almost ten months in Uruguay, Annala assures they can “guarantee that the Fray Bentos plant will be better than the five plants the company has in Finland because the last plant in our country was built in 2001 and in the last five years technology has improved greatly”. This engineer, specialized in forestation, explains that despite all the fears there may be “no dioxins can be found in our effluents, and although there are chlorine-based residues (Aox), these are not dioxins and they are only present in small amounts”. One of the four Botnia Vice-Presidents pointed out that there are no differences between the ECF (Elemental

Chlorine Free) cellulose paste bleaching method and the TCF (Total Chlorine Free) and chlorine-compound free method.

- Annala was then asked "If so, why does Greenpeace recommend one method over the other?"

- I have met with Greenpeace but they have their own agenda. Here in Finland their studies are old and for them it is easier to say that the TCF method is better because they carried out studies in the 1980s and do not want anything new" she answered.

- Argentina is requesting a new environmental impact study. Who would you trust to carry out this study?

- The issue is who the Argentinians trust – Annala retorted. More diplomatically, Rintala insisted that "Botnia trusts all experts who are informed about the project. Argentina and Uruguay must decide who to choose".

- Argentina proposed that works be suspended so as to carry out a new environmental impact study, have you considered that possibility?

- It must be recalled that this is a very big building project that employs around 2000 workers. This would have a very strong economic impact; it would be useless to invest money in something useless. Research and studies can be carried out perfectly well before the plant's start-up, while building work continues – was the initial reply of the Communications Vice-President, which then tempered the remarks with the words summarized at the beginning of this article.

Botnia executives insist that the pulp plant will not produce any biological contamination of the river but admit that unpleasant odours may be smelt when starting-up the plant or halting work for maintenance purposes or because of a strike. "We recommend not to start-up the plant over Christmas or in the holiday season", said Annala. Of course they do not attach much importance to this negative effect because the rotten-eggs odour is usually smelt two kilometers away and the Ñandubaysal beach resort in Gualeguaychú is over 12 km away from the pulp mill of Fray Bentos.

Ranked second on the European paper market and eleventh in world trade, the Finnish company started developing the Uruguay project around 15 years ago with the purchase of 120 thousand hectares, 70 percent of which were used for eucalyptus plantations, made through FOSA. Botnia executives stated they "never considered the possibility of settling in Entre Rios", at the most they did consider buying more raw material to meet an estimated annual production of one million tons for the Uruguayan plant. In Finland, all five plants produce a total amount of 2.7 million tons per annum.

The company and the Ministry of the Environment expressed that the Finnish State "has no stake in the business". Beyond official statements, the Finnish Ministry of the Environment recognized that Finland's president had the intention of meeting with Argentine president, Néstor Kirchner, at the Vienna Summit last week. Anyhow, this attempt was unsuccessful. Now all eyes are placed on the International Court of Justice at The Hague although nobody loses hope for a bilateral contact to relax tensions. Some even speculate that the Spanish pulp plant, ENCE –that has practically not gone ahead with the building work- will end up by changing its location.

