

Cisneros Foundation faked dolphin video

by Leonor Rubiano S.

In 1986, Gustavo Cisneros, Pedro Tinoco, and Siro Febres Cordero, among others, created the BIOMA Foundation, for the stated purpose of "conserving the natural heritage of the country," by constituting the only non-profit private organization supposedly committed to identifying and managing natural areas.

In late November 1993, the Cisneros-owned Univision (the largest Spanish-language television station in the United States) broadcast a video in the United States prepared by BIOMA, entitled "The Massacre of the Dolphins in Venezuela, because of Tuna Fishing." The broadcast took place in the midst of discussions over the possible lifting of the 1991 U.S. tuna embargo against Venezuela, which had slashed U.S. imports of Venezuelan tuna by 65%. The film caused a furor in several countries, but especially in the United States. Environmentalist activists staged demonstrations in front of Venezuelan consulates, urging a continued embargo against Venezuelan tuna. The government of President Ramón J. Velásquez received thousands of letters denouncing the "massacre of the dolphins" by tuna fisherman who were supposedly using the dolphins for bait.

In response, Venezuela's environment minister launched an investigation into this so-called ecological crime, and on Jan. 12 released a transcript of the video before it had been edited for broadcast. The transcript showed that BIOMA had manipulated two gullible Venezuelan fishermen into harpooning a dolphin and butchering it. (See also *EIR*, Oct. 1, 1993, "Pacific Tuna Fishermen Take on Greenpeace.")

BIOMA had sold the exclusive rights to the unedited material to The Dolphin Freedom Foundation. It was there that the Foreign Affairs Ministry found the unedited video transcript, in which one can hear the voice of BIOMA president Aldemaro Romero, Jr. giving instructions to a fisherman on how to make the dolphin's death look as natural as possible. When one of the fishermen asks why they have to do this to the poor animal, Romero can be heard explaining that this is for "university research," and asking the fisherman to look away from the camera and act as if Romero were not there.

The Environment Ministry did not rule out the possibility that illegal hunting of dolphins did take place, but concluded that such a possibility "cannot be considered a frequent, public, generalized, and tolerated practice," much less in the quantities of 9,000-67,000 dolphins a year, as claimed by the video.

Motives for the fraud

What was Cisneros's BIOMA Ecological Foundation seeking to accomplish with the broadcast of this video, which Cable News Network (CNN) also aired?

On Feb. 16, on the morning television program "Lo de Hoy," Venezuelan Labor Party chairman Alejandro Peña remarked, "For those who don't know it, one of the directors of BIOMA is Gustavo Cisneros." Peña urged that an investigation into the affair be conducted immediately, given that Gov. José Ramón Martínez, of Sucre state where the fraudulent video was made, has sued BIOMA and its director Aldemaro Romero for treason against the fatherland. Governor Martínez is demanding to know if Romero is a front-man for the U.S. tuna company Earth Island Institute, which used the BIOMA video as a reference in demanding the continued tuna embargo against Venezuela. That embargo has already driven thousands of Venezuelan fishermen into penury.

Profauna foundation director José Luis Méndez Arocha has meanwhile revealed that the fishermen were offered liquor in payment for their part in the video, and that it is clear that they were no experts in killing dolphins, since it took them the entire day to catch the one poor dolphin, while BIOMA claimed that "because of their skill, the fishermen hunt up to 12 dolphins a day." Brother Gines of the La Salle Foundation also stated that the figures on dolphin deaths as presented by BIOMA were greatly exaggerated.

Many other voices have been raised to demand that BIOMA be charged with simulating a punishable act, inciting a crime, and for *lesa patria*, among other offenses. José Borregales, the president of Venezuela's Fisherman's Federation (Fetrapesca), has urged an investigation of these "non-profit" foundations, which nonetheless have publications that appeal for money to "save the dolphins." Borregales also called for the release of fishermen who have been arrested for violating resolutions prohibiting the massacre of cetaceans.

Two days after Peña's televised statement, and after it was revealed that the true owners of BIOMA include various Banco Latino directors and Gustavo Cisneros, the Cisneros family's Venevisión broadcast a special program on dolphins which, according to the Federation of Environmentalist Organizations and Councils (FORJA), was nothing other than a criminal justification of an already criminal act. The Venevisión program claimed that BIOMA head Aldemaro Romero was acting on his own authority, and that BIOMA should therefore not be held responsible. The program called for Romero's resignation from the BIOMA board, because his methods were bad.

Although the court pursuing Sucre Governor Martínez's charges against Romero has yet to hand down a ruling, efforts have already been made in recent days to open up a debate in the national congress on the supposed corruption of Governor Martínez. But the initiative was rejected, on the basis that it was a regional matter not requiring congressional consideration.