

A lack of funds and political will has blocked the setting up of environmental courts in El Salvador, which were approved by law in 1998 with the aim of addressing the serious environmental problems facing this country. The Supreme Court, which is to provide the infrastructure, staff and financing for the special courts, and the environment ministry have discussed the mechanism for introducing the new courts for the last 14 years without being able to set this essential instrument in motion.

"It definitely has to do with the budget... The Supreme Court's priorities are oriented in a different direction," lawyer Salvador Nieto, a legal adviser to the environment ministry, told IPS. The amount of funds needed has not been announced. The new courts are to try cases of pollution and environmental crimes, which in the meantime are handled by the ordinary courts. The attorney general's office has an environment unit run by specialist prosecutors, and the national civil police have an environmental division. But environmental law is complex and also requires special courts and expert judges devoted exclusively to this area, Nieto said. El Salvador is one of the countries of the Americas where deforestation has wreaked the greatest havoc, to the extent that now only 2,655 square kilometres remain forested, including mangroves, equivalent to 12.6 percent of the country's territory, according to a study carried out in 2007 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the environment ministry. (...)

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