

# *Land and sovereignty*

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By Guillermo Alvarado

Argentina has a historical dispute with the United Kingdom over the sovereignty of the Malvinas Islands and other South Atlantic island territories, which were occupied since 1833 in acts of piracy and which provoked an armed conflict 40 years ago.

However, this is not the only case in which foreign interests call into question the territorial integrity of the South American nation, because in recent times other conflicts of this nature have come to light in the

extensive region of Patagonia.

A few days ago, the sixth march organized by the Fundación Interactiva para Promover la Cultura del Agua was held to protest the closing of all access roads to Lago Escondido, a tourist destination and important fresh water reserve.

The arbitrary measure was ordered by British businessman Joseph Lewis, considered one of the richest men in the world, who illegally bought 12,000 hectares of land in the province of Río Negro, which includes the lake area.

There are allegations that he maintains a strong paramilitary contingent there and recently built a runway where war planes can land.

Lewis maintained a close relationship with former President Mauricio Macri, who on more than one occasion was a guest at that property and had the investigations against the magnate shelved.

Another case involved the Italian transnational Benetton, which, in complicity with former President Carlos Menem, appropriated two million hectares of land that actually belonged to the Mapuche community, which has been fighting a legal battle to recover it ever since.

It was precisely in the midst of these struggles that the young Santiago Maldonado died in circumstances that have never been fully clarified, and his death raised waves of protests at home and abroad.

Although there are laws in Argentina to regulate land ownership, there are currently 12.5 million hectares in the hands of foreigners, representing 622 times the size of the autonomous city of Buenos Aires.

Of these, there are two million hectares whose owners are unknown, because they hide behind offshore companies created in tax havens.

This is a serious problem that affects not only indigenous communities but also opens the door to the irregular exploitation of strategic natural resources, including forests and water, which are indispensable for the life and well-being of the population.

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