
Paraguay: Forced contact brought illness and death to indigenous man

Parojnai was his name. He was from the Ayoreo-Totobiegosode indigenous people who inhabit the Chaco forest stretching from Paraguay to Bolivia and Argentina, south of the Amazon basin.

Parojnai Picanerai, his wife and their children had managed to live in the Chaco forest (located in Paraguay), without contact with the outside world despite increasing encroachment onto their territories. Though the Paraguayan law acknowledges the Ayoreo's right to own the lands which they have traditionally inhabited, their forest is being sold to private owners and rapidly cleared by speculators and ranchers for logging and later on for cattle raising.

In 1979 and 1986, the American fundamentalist New Tribes Mission organized "manhunts" to force large groups of Ayoreo Totobiegosode out of the forest. Later on, harassment and bulldozing of the Chaco forest continued with regular incursions. Ayoreo communal life in villages was disrupted and they had to move camp to live in hiding inside the forest, abandoning their huts and leaving behind the crops they had planted as well as valued possessions such as cooking pots and tools.

Finally, tired of the lonely life and of living on the run, Parojnai and his family eventually gave up and made contact in 1998. Survival International brings us his testimony in that moment: "We ran from one place to another. It looked like the bulldozer was following us. I had to leave my tools, my bow, my rope to run faster... We thought that the bulldozer had seen our garden and came to eat the fruit – and to eat us too."

They went to live in a small Ayoreo community on the edge of the forest, but soon after contact, Parojnai contracted flu and tuberculosis. Survival campaigner Jonathan Mazower, who had visited him in 2003 and in 2007, this month said: 'When I first met Parojnai, he was already very sick. But I've seen pictures of him taken on the day after first contact and he was incredibly fit and healthy then.'

On the first days of May, Parojnai died. His death acquired a significance that Mazower expressed quite properly: "For me, Parojnai's life symbolises the fate of indigenous people in the Americas since Columbus. Loss of his land to outsiders forced him to give up his independence, and contact left him sick with a disease that eventually killed him. The same tragedies faced by Indians 500 years ago are being played out today for the world's last remaining uncontacted tribes."

Article based on information from: "Paraguay: Ayoreo Indian Dies after First Contact", 7 May 2008, Survival International, <http://mcsv.net/cgi-bin/redir?MCid=ADomPAu9J28E4tnmA4RM>