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## Ecuador: The Awa People and their territory between political interests and economic pressure

The Ministry of the Environment is placing Ecuador's indigenous territories in danger. Under a new term, that of "co-management" it intends to hand over our ancestral territories and their natural resources to logging, oil palm and mining companies.

On 12 January 2007 the Minister of the Environment, Ana Albán modified the granting of Awa territory and set up a co-management regime between the indigenous Awa and Afro-Ecuadorian communities for the Parish of Ricaurte-Tululbí, Canton of San Lorenzo, Province of Esmeraldas. This resolution affects five Awa communities: Guadualito, Mataje, Balsareño, Pambilar and La Unión, involving 771 inhabitants and a territory of some 17,493 hectares.

We Awa are an ancestral indigenous nation from the Northwest of Ecuador and the Southwest of Colombia. We have a unique culture and our own language "Awa pìt". We have 22 legally established Awa centres (communities) in Ecuador. They are all organized in the Federation of Awa Centres of Ecuador (FCAE), which is legally recognized by the Ecuadorian State. FCAE and its 22 centres have been granted a total of some 115,336 hectares of community land (under different kinds of deeds), located in the Provinces of Esmeraldas, Carchi and Imbabura.

We need our land for our livelihood and our survival. We are not going to abandon our homes and communities nor are we going to retreat a single step. If our ancestral lands are invaded, there will be confrontations. We will defend our land to the utmost, even if it involves losing our lives. We certainly do not want to reach any extreme or use any violence, but we hold the Minister Ana Alban directly responsible for anything that may occur in this case.

We are protected by our legitimate rights, guaranteed by the Ecuadorian Constitution and by international treaties such as the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, signed by the Ecuadorian State.

In April 2006 the Ecuadorian Negro Association (ASONE) sent a letter to the former president Alfredo Palacios in which it demanded the derogation, using false information and ill intentioned accusations, of the granting of 99,337 hectares of our Awa territory made by the Ministry of the Environment on 2 March 2006.

It is sufficient to visit our land to see who lives there and grows their crops there. ASONE says we are Colombian and drug traffickers, but the truth is that we are one of the 14 indigenous nationalities officially recognized in Ecuador. We were all born here, we have Ecuadorian identity cards and all our communities are legally established. There are no coca plantations on Awa territory.

We have always lived peacefully on our lands and no one has claimed ancestral rights over them. On 2 March 2006, after 30 years of struggle, the Minister of the Environment Ana Alban finally granted us 99,337 hectares of our ancestral lands. This grant was the result of painstaking public, administrative and field work over a period of three years. Each metre of our property lines has been checked in the

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field.

Furthermore, these same lands were demarcated as “Traditional Settlement of the Awa Indigenous Community Area” by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1988 and our ancestral possession was demarcated and recognized as an “Awa Ethnic Reserve” corresponding to 101,000 hectares by INEFAN, the predecessor to the Ministry of the Environment in 1995. Our lands’ property lines have never been moved.

Land traffickers from San Francisco and San Lorenzo are behind this complaint, ghost organizations such as the “Citizen Front for the Defence of Ancestral Territories” together with the former deputy, Rafael Erazo from Esmeraldas. They want to sell our natural resources and lands to logging, oil palm and mining companies. They are concealed behind ASONE to make it look like an ethnic conflict, but this is not the case. We have no problems with Afro-Ecuadorian communities. For centuries we have been living side by side with them as good neighbours, each on his own land. We have mutual respect for our cultures and our lands.

In March there was a first invasion by Guido Rodríguez, a well-known logging intermediary in the area, who works for Plywood Ecuatoriana and CODESA, belonging to the Alvarez Barba Group. With his personnel he invaded the forest belonging to the Awá Balsareño centre to open up strips in the forest. The community evicted him, as we had already done in 2005 when he came to the territory with high-clearance tractors to cut down our forest and turn it into plywood boards.

In another Awa centre, the Rio Tigre centre in the Province of Carchi, Tulcán canton, the situation is even worse. In 2002, the National Institute for Agrarian Development (INDA), the State institution responsible for granting lands, legally granted 6,024 hectares of communal ancestral lands to the Awa Rio Tigre Centre. But in December last year, INDA resolved to revert the land grant to the State, accepting the demand made by two farming associations from Ibarra, the “Asociación de Trabajadores Autónomos San Vicente” and the “Asociación de Desarrollo Comunitario Vista Hermosa del Río Tigre” which are claiming some 4,000 hectares of forest in Awa territory.

These associations also speculate with land: they want to take over our land and forests to do business. They have never lived there or worked the land. Their partner is a corporation (Egocreanet – Ecuador), and they want to allocate them some 500 hectares of these lands.

Today our territory is the last large remnant in the whole Ecuadorian coast of tropical rainforest. We have always defended our lands and have preserved our forests. We are living in harmony with the environment, benefiting from it without destroying it. As there is no land left for new oil palm plantations they want to take over our Awa territory.

We will not allow them to evict our communities to sell our territory to logging and oil palm companies. We are organized and ready to implement any necessary action. We have our own Community Forest Management Sub-programme and a Centre for Stocking and Transforming Timber in San Lorenzo. We take advantage of small quantities of timber using traditional methods of low environmental impact.

If there is this interest in recovering ancestral lands in the area of San Lorenzo, the authorities should recover the tens of thousands of hectares of lands that were taken from Afro-Ecuadorian communities by oil palm companies. These companies have felled some 40,000 hectares of forests in the Canton of San Lorenzo since 1999 to establish industrial oil palm plantations.

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The consequences are most serious. The Choco forests, with their high rate of biodiversity have disappeared for ever. The animals that were hunted and the fish in the rivers have gone. The Afro-Ecuadorian communities have practically no land, food or sources of employment. The rivers have been poisoned with insecticides and fertilizers from the palm plantations. It is a green agro-industrial desert.

In this context the complicity of the Ecuadorian State should also be pointed out in the occupation of ancestral lands and in the felling of forests in the Canton of San Lorenzo. On 8 August 2002, the former president, Gustavo Noboa signed decree 2961, designating for agricultural use a polygon of approximately 60,000 hectares of community lands in the Canton of San Lorenzo, including part of Awa territory and 5,000 hectares of the State's Forestry Heritage.

This decree was jointly prepared by the Ministries of the Environment, Agriculture and Foreign Affairs and oil palm companies. The aim of the decree has been to legitimize the land that the oil palm companies acquired illegally, to increase their area and legalize the felling of forests that has been going on for years without permits or environmental impact assessments, or consideration for local communities.

FCAE demands that the Ecuadorian Government:

- Respects and definitively ensures land title deeds for Awa territory
- Prosecutes all invasion, extraction of timber by third parties, etc. on Awa territory
- Recognizes the Awa indigenous authority over its territory (circumscription)

At the same time we are asking for support and endorsement from all organizations in defence of our land.

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