
Bolivia: Indigenous Toromona in voluntary isolation in serious danger of disappearing

The world is becoming aware of the situation of the Indigenous Peoples living in isolation in the Amazon. It seems incredible, but some animals are better protected than the human groups seeking to preserve their isolation. There is no doubt that this is a basic human right that the peoples in isolation have the faculty to exercise and defend and we to respect. However, and in spite of the recommendations made by the UN, the OAS, the COICA, the IUCN and other global and regional institutions, the situation of these peoples inhabiting the continental Amazon –the greatest world reserve of uncontacted peoples– is alarming. All these peoples, without exception, are in danger of forced disappearance. Urgent action must be encouraged to avoid further genocide. The Indigenous Peoples in isolation still existing in the Amazon are a unique human and cultural heritage that should not follow the same path as that of hundreds of forest peoples: slow extermination, violent and silent disappearance, a shameful and sinister genocide.

In spite of the fact that the country has an indigenous majority, the situation in Bolivia is no different from what we have just described. There is little awareness of the dramatic situation, efforts are isolated and there is a lack of a comprehensive vision to mobilize those who can help provide solutions. Although the peoples living in isolation are included in official reports, addressing their problems is limited by bureaucracy and by a lack of understanding of how serious they are.

This is in contrast with the strength shown by the Amazon Indigenous organizations, whose capacity for action has been demonstrated since 1990 with the March for Territory and Dignity, a landmark in the history of Bolivia when the issue of the country's Indigenous Amazon peoples was placed on the national agenda. However, 16 years later, the issue of peoples living in isolation continues to be secondary, anecdotic and almost invisible, including for many of the organizations working in the Amazon itself.

The Toromona are an archetypical case of the above. They are part of the Tacana linguistic family and their unquestionable historic past is barely known or valued. Today, it is presumed that indigenous people from that ethnic group are living in a sector of the Rio Colorado valley and at the headwaters of the Sonene or Heath River, inside the Madidi National Park in the northern Amazon part of the Department of La Paz. This presence should be certified forthwith to enable actions for strict protection to be undertaken.

As the Madidi Expedition, we have been struggling for this to happen since 2000 when we were made aware of the issue while working in the mestizo communities adjacent to the alleged Toromona territory. In October last year, we observed with alarm and publicly denounced that the region was seething with logging companies which, in their eagerness to find precious wood, could come into violent contact with the group living in isolation, and thus seriously threaten their existence. In this respect we are preparing a further expedition to the region in the dry season to complete our field work and present the indications and/or sufficient material and/or visual evidence to prove the survival of the historic Toromona people, respecting their right to isolation, that is to say, avoiding any physical contact either by us or by anyone else.

This new expedition is inscribed in a different context. Bolivia as a nation is going through a time of historic changes. For the first time, an indigenous person has become President of the Republic. In this respect we feel sure of the understanding and support of Evo Morales, the country's highest authority. At the same time we hope that the issue of the Indigenous Peoples Living in Isolation and the Indigenous Peoples in Highly Vulnerable Situations is included in the text of the new Bolivian State Political Constitution that will start to be discussed as from 6 August in the city of Sucre in the framework of a Constituent Assembly.

Through this article, not only do we want to warn about the risk involved for the isolated peoples of Bolivia, but also to convince those who want to help the Toromona that they should contact us. They may do so through the following e-mail: pablocingolani@yahoo.com.ar . The struggle for the protection of the last of the peoples living in isolation in the Bolivian Amazon can wait no longer. It is now or never.

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Those wishing to learn more on this subject can do so at www.bolpress.com or at the blog www.cingolani.ssolucion.com containing the document "Sobre antropología de urgencia en Bolivia: Pueblos étnicos de tierras bajas en situación de alta vulnerabilidad y en aislamiento voluntario" prepared by the anthropologist Álvaro Díez Astete. . The document is also available at WRM's web page at:
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