
Paraguay: Congress failed to support the land rights of the Ayoreo

Paraguay's Congress debated in April a bill meant to protect the territory that is home to an unknown number of Ayoreo-Totobiegosode indigenous people living in voluntary isolation.

The Totobiegosode are members of the Ayoreo tribe, some of whom still lead a nomadic life in the dense scrub forest of western Paraguay, living off the abundant game, such as wild pigs, anteaters and armadillos. They also gather wild honey, and cultivate crops, rejecting contact with outsiders. Dramatic evidence of their existence came one year ago, when a group of seventeen emerged from the forest and issued a plea to the outside world to stop destroying their homeland. Most of the tribe have already been brought out of the forest, but an unknown number remain, including the Ayoreo-Totobiegosode, resisting contact with outsiders. Their land is protected by injunctions, which are supposed to stop all deforestation. Under Paraguayan law, the indigenous people have the right to own their land.

However, most of the Ayoreo's territory is now in private hands. The core of their territory is owned by three private companies, two Brazilian and one Paraguayan who have bought up the land illegally and have already started to clear it. Much of the Ayoreo's forest has already been destroyed for logging and cattle ranching. The land-owners have repeatedly defied injunctions meant to protect the indigenous people, sending in bulldozers to open tracks into the forest.

Last year Paraguay's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, put forward a bill to expropriate the area from the logging companies and to return it to the Ayoreo-Totobiegosode. It would have implied the restitution of 114,000 has of the original 2.8 million has. However, after fierce lobbying by a powerful landowners' association, the bill was rejected by the upper house (the Senate). It returned to the Chamber of Deputies where on last April 7 the leverage of loggers and cattle ranchers influenced the Congress which ended rejecting the bill.

Article based on information from: "Congress rejects bill to protect isolated Indians", 2005, Cultural Survival, E-mail: mr@survival-international.org, <http://survival-international.org/news.php?id=351>; "Paraguay - Congreso rechaza ley que protegería indígenas", Adital, <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/content/view/full/15459>