Ecuador: Women from Sarayaku Against Terrorism Waged by the Army

On April 17, more than 400 special troops of the Ecuadorian army entered the detachment of Tigre, on the South Eastern border of the Province of Pastaza, frontier with Peru, allegedly to "capture, neutralize and annihilate armed elements" in the area. This territory belongs to the Kichwa Yana Yaku community, where the Pastaza Indigenous Peoples Organization (OPIP) is based. On that same date, 80 soldiers unexpectedly occupied its premises, accusing it of being the “centre of logistic support” for allegedly subversive groups.

Even though after 15 days of searching the whole area the army found no evidence, on 30 April, 60 elite soldiers heavily armed with rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, rocket launchers and other heavy weapons, violently assaulted the community of Yana Yaku accusing them of being the "key logistical support" of insurgent groups. They broke into the houses and other community facilities, threatening the women that opposed them both with weapons and verbal abuse, confiscating hunting tools, intruding into the family farms allegedly looking for coca plantations and overrunning the school causing panic and terror among the children. The community denounced that the army forced men of the community to take pictures carrying hunting guns, which later were showed as "evidence of subversive activities."

Concurrently with these operations, the army increased militarization of the Kichwa community in Sarayaku – a community that borders the Bobonaza River in Pastaza – who have been defending their rights against oil policies. The women of Sarayaku are voicing their deep concern and anger over these operations which they denounce are linked to the so called "Patriot Plan" --a controversial military operation that would deploy some 15,000 troops in the Colombian/Ecuadorian tropical forests as part of Plan Colombia, openly backed by the United States. The Sarayaku women also say that the increasingly violent militarization process of the indigenous territories of Pastaza subscribes to the oil policies launched in the province of Pastaza by the former army colonel, Lucio Gutierrez (now President of Ecuador).

The women denounce that on the one hand the military high command publicly proclaims respect for the Constitution and democracy while on the other hand it is threatening the lives of the communities in open violation of the collective rights of indigenous peoples set out in the Constitution and in the International Labour Organization’s Convention Nº 169.

Faced with this action, the Indigenous Women’s Association of Sarayaku (AMIS) has expressed its solidarity with the women and children of the Yana Yaku community, declaring: “We support the ideals of the Sumak Kausai (the Kichwa people’s philosophy of life) alternative development proposal. We also support the proposals submitted by the Kichwa people of Sarayaku to the National Government and Armed Forces:

1. Immediate withdrawal of the troops who are abusing and perpetrating actions against the psychological integrity, pacific cohabitation and productive activities of the Yana Yaku and Jatun Molino communities in the jurisdiction of Sarayaku.

2. That the communities of the Kichwa Peoples and other indigenous peoples who traditionally live in the Province of Pastaza will never allow any type of military occupation which, under the pretext of operations mounted by the armed forces themselves, is intended to support oil activities in the Indigenous territories of Pastaza.

3. Establishment of responsibilities and dismissal of Dr. Clara Fernandez, the Judge responsible for the Pastaza Attorney's Office, who is involved in these shameful actions.

4. We demand impeachment by National Congress of the Joint Commander (General Octavio Romero) and the Commanders of the Amazonas Fourth Division (General Gonzalo Tapia) and the 17th Brigade of the Pastaza Forest (Colonel Fausto Rentaria), for attacking Indigenous peoples rights, women's rights, children's rights, creating a feeling of insecurity among the communities and for unnecessarily wasting vast economic and logistic resources, assets of the Ecuadorian people.

5. The establishment of an inter-institutional commission comprising the National Congress Commission for Amazon Affairs, Human Rights organizations, the Catholic Church, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, CONAIE and media representatives to thoroughly investigate and make known to national and international public opinion this serious abuse of the morals, honesty, transparency and dignity of the Indigenous peoples of Pastaza.

6. To request the establishment of a commission comprising representatives of the UN, ILO and OAS to investigate directly the violation of the Indigenous rights in Pastaza.

7. To request the intervention of ALDHU and other Ecuadorian human rights organizations to ensure the peace and integrity of the Indigenous communities of Pastaza.

8. To lodge a complaint with the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples.

9. To hold an Assembly of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza in the community of Yana Yaku, with the presence of CONAIE, to give support to the inhabitants and adopt actions aimed at preserving the right to life and to peace of the Kichwa people of Pataza.

10. To compensate the Yana Yaku community for the economic and productive, psychological and moral damages caused by the raids that affected the community's normal development.

11. As the Association of Indigenous Women of Sarayaku, (AMIS), in support of the women of the Yana Yaku community, we appeal to the Inter-American Court for Human Rights, against the violation of Women and Family Rights, set out in the Constitution of the Republic. We empower that Court to bring the corresponding action against Dr Clara Fernandez, the Judge responsible for the Public Attorney's Office in Pastaza.

Furthermore, we affirm that the Sarayaku people's struggle for their dignity, respect for their territory, their projects and dreams of alternative development is not an isolated one. It is the decision of all the Kichwa OPIP grass-roots communities and other sectors identifying themselves with this cause, and therefore OPIP will never accept any kind of abuse from any sector, be it oil, governmental or military."

Article based on information from: "Manifiesto de la Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas de Sarayacu 'AMIS' frente a la acción terrorista de las Fuerzas Armadas del Ecuador en la comunidad Kichwa Yana Yaku, en Pastaza"; "Militarización sigue en las comunidades indígenas de Pastaza en

Ecuador", by the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Patraza, http://www.earthrights.org/news/Yanayakuspanish.shtml ; "Acción terrorista de las Fuerzas Armadas del Ecuador en la comunidad Kichwa de Yana Yaku, Pastaza. Declaración de la Organización de los Pueblos Indígenas del Pastaza (OPIP), Consejo de Gobierno del Territorio Autonómo de la Nación Originaria del Pueblo Kichwa de Sarayaku (TAYJASARUTA)", 1 May 2004, http://www.llacta.org/organiz/coms/com574.htm