
Indigenous peoples fight for territorial rights in Guyana

The opening of Guyana to foreign companies from the mid-1980s has caused destruction in the country's tropical forests -a rare case of virtually untouched ecosystems until then- and the complete disregard of the Amerindians that have lived in these forests for centuries using their resources in a sustainable way. This process continues to the detriment of Guyana's forests and indigenous peoples, who are carrying out actions to revert such situation.

On November 2 the government of Guyana and Vancouver-based mining company, Vanessa Ventures Ltd., signed an agreement granting Vanessa more than two million hectares of land in which to conduct geophysical and geological surveys for gold and primary diamond sources over the next two years. This concession includes the heavily forested Kanuku mountain range, through to the upper reaches of the Corentyne River on the border with Suriname in the eastern region of Guyana. The area is part of the ancestral territory of the Wai Wai, Wapisiana and Macusi indigenous peoples. They have vigorously objected to any mining or logging company operating on their lands and are demanding that their rights to their ancestral lands be legally recognised and respected. It is also the location of a proposed National Park as part of a National Protected Areas System project to be implemented in the country.

Guyanese Prime Minister pointed out that, even if the Geology and Mines Commission has legal authority to permit exploration for or exploitation of any minerals -including those found under Indigenous lands- the government has adopted a policy according to which the permission of the affected communities is to be previously obtained. Such a position may sound positive and progressive concerning the rights of Indigenous peoples, but several aspects are raising concern.

Given that this policy is not instituted in law there is no legal support to suppose that it is not going to be ignored by the Geology and Mines Commission as has happened in the past. On the other hand, Amerindian titled lands are only a small part of the lands over which indigenous peoples of Guyana have asserted ownership rights. To date, indigenous villages have received title to just one-quarter of the area recommended by the Lands Commission -established in 1967 in accordance with a legal condition for the independence of the country- and approximately one-seventh of that identified by Amerindians themselves as theirs.

The failure of the government to address indigenous land rights is also causing problems in connection with the establishment of a protected areas system. Several communities –as those of the Patamona and the Rupununi- have rejected National Parks on their lands until their land rights have been fully recognised by the national authorities.

The full recognition of the Amerindian land rights in Guyana is a necessary measure to stop the detrimental activities of the multinational (mostly Canadian) mining companies and Asian logging companies that operate in the country. The case of Vanessa is just an example of this state of things. Indigenous peoples of Guyana have been very active in this regards. For example, in October 1997, all of the community leaders of the Wai Wai, Wapisiana and Macusi peoples formed the Touchau's Amerindian Council of Region 9 to defend their ancestral territories from miners and loggers. Last

month six Akawaio and Pemon Indigenous leaders, from the Upper Mazaruni, filed the first ever land rights law suit in the High Court of Guyana. "Our communities have been requesting title to these lands, which we know to be ours, since the Amerindian Lands Commission visited our communities in 1967. Since then we have attempted to discuss this matter on many occasions without result" states the written statement presented in Court. Time for patience seems to be over. Now it's time for action.

Sources: Guyana Information Update, Forest Peoples Programme, 5/11/98 and 13/11/98.