Paraguay: Report on the Ayoreo People by IWGIA

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) has issued a report on the indigenous Ayoreo people in Paraguay and the injustices they have been experiencing due to the expansion of ranching, illegal sale of land and extractive industries (1).

More than a report, it is an urgent wakeup call that Director of Iniciativa Amotocodie Benno Glauser introduces as follows:

Non-indigenous society began to invade the vast territory of the Ayoreo only 50 years ago, with the goal of taking possession of the land.

From that time forward, group by group, the Ayoreo were deported to mission stations and sedentarized by force. Today, there are still Ayoreo living in the forest, in six or seven group territories that have always belonged to them. During the Paraguayan dictatorship, most of the northern Chaco region was divided into lots, and what was once Ayoreo territory was turned into a commodity for the benefit and profit of a few hundred private landowners. Until today, they are permitted to deforest or otherwise transform their landholdings as they wish, to pursue productive activities that –under close scrutiny– serve exclusively their own interests.

The future of the Chaco forest, of those Ayoreo who continue to live there as isolated groups, and of a territory that is still the territory of the Ayoreo people, now depends on these landowners: Paraguayan citizens, Mennonites, foreigners, agro-industrial and cattle ranching companies, and oil prospecting firms. They are responsible for determining the future of the only significant continuous forested area left standing in Paraguay.

The state, until now, has not intervened in this matter in any meaningful way, and has failed to assume its responsibility: to protect the public good and public interest, to enforce the country's laws, and to protect human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Non-indigenous society is not even aware of what is happening in and with the northern Chaco. "Public opinion" has no opinion on the matter. The international community is only very slowly beginning to recognize the Chaco, the Gran Chaco, as a vital ecosystem not only for the Ayoreo and other indigenous peoples, but also for the future of non-indigenous peoples and for humanity as a whole.

Today, the Ayoreo people are watching what is happening to their territory, which is their home and the foundation for both their way of life and their livelihood.

They do so in a state of poverty, uprooted from their land, precariously clinging to the margins of the society of their invaders and a culture that is not theirs and never will be. Today, through this publication, the Ayoreo people are speaking out to those who are in charge of the state, and to all non-indigenous people in Paraguay and the rest of the world.

They are speaking out because they need to be seen, and because they need the injustices and human rights violations of which they have been and continue to be victims to be seen, recognized and reparated. They need non-indigenous people to assume their role and to accept their responsibility in this very recent colonial history, open to everyone's view. They are speaking out to voice a call for the justice that has yet to be extended to peoples and cases like theirs.

Today the Ayoreo people are standing up and reaching out. They are not reaching out to beg or ask for favours. They are taking a stand and demanding to be heard and respected, reaffirming their dignity and their right to their own distinct way of life.

(1) "Paraguay: The Case of the Ayoreo," May 2010, Unión de Nativos Ayoreo de Paraguay (UNAP), Iniciativa Amotocodie (IA), International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), http://www.iwgia.org/sw42257.asp