

Survival International

REPORT TO CERD

July 21, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Survival International is extremely concerned about human rights violations being committed against Ayoreo-Totobiegosode Indians living in northern Paraguay.

An unknown number of Ayoreo have chosen to resist contact with the outside world and are living in the dry scrub forest of the Chaco province. However, they are being systematically uprooted from their homes and forced to flee from ranchers to make way for cattle.

The isolated Indians are in imminent danger of contracting deadly diseases to which they have no immunity. Furthermore, their survival wholly depends on the preservation of their forest home, which provides them with their food, shelter and medicine.

The Ayoreo-Totobiegosode have made it clear that they do not want to engage in contact with outsiders; history has shown, time and time again, that enforced contact ends in violence and death.

WHO ARE THEY?

The Ayoreo live in the sub-tropical forests of northern Paraguay. They live in small communities growing crops and hunting for food.

Since 1969, evangelical missionaries have organised manhunts to track down and 'pacify' the Ayoreo. This has resulted in the death of numerous Indians both during contact and in the subsequent months due to the transmission of common diseases.

In 2004, a group of seventeen uncontacted Ayoreo came out of the forest to speak with contacted members of the tribe. One of them, an Ayoreo elder called Ajupede Areguedate Chiqueñoro, told how they had been living in constant fear and flight of bulldozers that were destroying their homes.

The continuing spread of cattle ranching throughout the Chaco region has placed unprecedented pressure on the Indians. Vast tracts of the Ayoreo's

forest have disappeared, forcing them to move from place to place in search of food, water and security.

The Ayoreo have been awaiting legal title to a small part of their traditional territory since 1993. Under Paraguayan law, their claim should have been granted years ago, however, the economic and political powers behind foreign beef firms have effectively halted the process.

THE THREATS

The principal threats facing the Ayoreo are three Brazilian-owned cattle ranching firms: Yaguarete Pora, River Plate and BBC S.A.

Yaguarete Pora

Yaguarete owns 78,549 hectares of the Ayoreo's traditional territory. Thousands of hectares of forest have already been illegally cleared by company workers.

In May 2010, the company was found guilty of hiding evidence proving uncontacted Indians were living on its land. It was issued with an unprecedented fine and its environmental license was removed.

Since then, the company has attempted to revoke the court order. If this happens, two thirds of the forest within the company's limits will be destroyed.

In July 2011, Yaguarete was forced to remove the UN Global Compact's logo from its website following a complaint from Ayoreo leaders. Despite this, the Ayoreo were told that the UN had no power to remove Yaguarete from the Compact.

BBC S.A and River Plate

In April 2011, satellite photographs were released exposing 4000 hectares of illegally cleared forest on land owned by the companies BBC and River Plate.

An intervention by Paraguayan authorities confirmed that company workers were illegally felling forest that is claimed by the Ayoreo.

Both firms were found guilty of the same crime as recently as 2008. Neither has been charged for its latest offence.

GOVERNMENT

Despite numerous promises, the Paraguayan government has not yet returned land deeds to its original inhabitants.

In April 2011, President Fernando Lugo told a press conference in Germany that economic and commercial interests in his country are, in effect, above the law. He also claimed that Paraguayan bureaucracy made it impossible for his government to uphold laws to prevent the illegal deforestation of indigenous lands.

This illustrates the key issues that hinder the Ayoreo's wellbeing within their territories and put at risk their survival.

There is a clear lack of political will to claim responsibility for the Ayoreo's land claim. This has left the Indians in limbo for almost 20 years. Meanwhile, their lands are rapidly disappearing under the bulldozer's blades.

CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTIONS

Uncontacted Ayoreo Indians face the very real risk of extinction if the invasion of their land is allowed to continue.

It is the responsibility of the Paraguayan government to put a stop to the expansion of cattle ranching in the Chaco, yet it has repeatedly failed to stand by its promises to protect its most vulnerable peoples. Any actions that are taken against cattle firms illegally deforesting land are inadequate and ineffective.

We urge the CERD to take up this pressing issue with the Paraguayan government during its forthcoming review. If the Ayoreo are to survive as a people - which they have strongly expressed their desire to do - they must be given back the lands that they have lived on and protected for hundreds of years.