

Forum: Human Rights Council I

Issue: Protecting the rights of indigenous tribes in the Amazon

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Introduction

There are hundreds of indigenous tribes in the Amazon rainforest and of those indigenous tribes, a large amount of them have been affected (disappeared or torn apart) by the colonization process, disease, alcohol, forced labor and war. The Amazon had become a refuge for its indigenous people. It lasted for a while because of the lack of a clear economic potential to be exploited by the colonizers. Consequently, the rainforest remained almost untouched by the western culture until the first half of last century.

There are still many Amazon rainforest tribes in the region, but many of them are under stress from legal (agriculture and cattle) and illegal activities (drug dealers, some wood cutters, some miners and biological traffickers). Although the indigenous population remained largely untouched up until the 20th century, it was still affected to a significant degree.

The New World had been discovered by Columbus in 1492, and by 1500, the Portuguese in Brazil, for example, had already started using indigenous peoples for hard work in extracting Brazilian wood; then came mining and agricultural activities. There has been a steady decline in the population of the indigenous during the ensuing 500 years after 1500. In Brazil, there were an estimated five million in 1500, but only 300,000 today. The deadly effects of disease epidemics and the introduction of new economic frontiers—cattle ranching, extraction of forest products such as rubber, and agricultural activities such as sugar plantations—contributed to the decimation of native communities, and, in some cases, total extinction. In the twentieth century, at least 90 indigenous groups have vanished.

Definition of Key Terms

Mega-Projects

Mega-projects are massive infrastructure projects; they can include pipelines, power lines, roads and dams

Indigenous People

This group of people is characterized by certain traits. First of all, they have to identify themselves as an indigenous people. They have to have a historical continuity with pre-colonial societies in that region. Presence of strong links to the territories and the natural resources within the territory is also very important. They must have distinct social, economic, or political systems and must have developed a distinct system of language and culture. They must not form the majority of the modern society that they live within.

General Overview

180 different languages spoken by 200 indigenous tribes in the Amazon, and with narrowing down to language families, that is still 30 language families. This shows how the cultural diversity in the Amazon rainforest is as heterogeneous as its fauna and flora. There are as many as 150 million indigenous people living in ancient forests worldwide and of that 150 million people, between 280,000 and 350,000 indigenous people live in the Brazilian Amazon. Of that number, 180,000 live traditionally, heavily dependent on the ancient forest for their sustenance and spiritual and cultural life. An example would be the Caboclos, traditional forest dwellers of Amerindian and Portuguese descent. They are dependent on the jungle for food, shelter, tools and medicines. According to the anthropologist Darcy Riberio, 55 indigenous populations vanished in the first half of the 20th century.

The Importance of the forest to indigenous people

Indigenous people are closely attached to their forest because it has protected them from outsiders, up until recently, and given them everything they need. They live sustainable lives, meaning they use the land without doing harm to the plants and animals that share the rainforest with them as a common home.

Challenges facing indigenous people

Indigenous peoples have lost their lives and the land they live on ever since the beginning of European colonization 500 years ago. Fortunately, the lack of roads prevented most of the foreigners from exploiting the deeper parts of the rainforest and protected those tribes that lived in those isolated pockets.

However, that natural barrier between the foreigners and the natives only lasted until forty years ago. Although indigenous people have lived on their lands for thousands of years, they do not own it, at least not in the eyes of the modern world. They have not filed "deeds" of land and do not possess "title",

thus they are not legal owners of their ancestral lands. In other words, their rights to their lands are not recognized by governments both abroad and at home. They have no other choice but to move to different areas, frequently to the cities. They lead destitute lives in the cities because they have no skills useful for the modern lifestyle and unfamiliar with modern culture.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1957	ILO Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention 107
1967	Texaco drills the first oil well in the Ecuadorean Amazon, located on the ancestral territory of the Cofán indigenous people.
1978	The Amazon Pact is established. Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela signs the Amazon Pact, a Brazilian initiative designed to coordinate the joint development of the Amazon Basin.
1989	Indigenous Peoples Convention 169
1994	Fernando Henrique Cardoso is elected president and makes controversial moves on the land issue. He seizes land for distribution among poor, and allows indigenous land claims to be challenged.
June 20, 1995	One of the most controversial projects proposed for the Amazon, the Tocantins - Araguaia Waterway, is begun. It has received strong opposition from indigenous groups like the Xavante.
2000	Celebrations to mark Brazil's 500th anniversary marred by protests by indigenous Indians, who say that racial genocide, forced labour and disease have dramatically cut their population from an estimated 5 million before the Portuguese arrived in 1500 to the current 350,000.
March 2000	Bolivia-Brazil pipeline (GASBOL), the longest natural gas pipeline in South America, is completed. Its construction, however, has affected the Amazonian community of El Carmen.
2007	Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly during its 62nd session at UN Headquarters in New York City on 13 September 2007. It establishes minimum standards for the enjoyment of individual and collective rights by indigenous peoples and "prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples". These include the right to effectively

participate in decision-making on matters which affect them, and the right to economic, social and cultural development.

The International Labor Organization Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) protect the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples around the world. It stresses respect for the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain their own identities. It also promotes their development in all areas including land rights, customary law, health and employment.

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council, with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights.

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