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Paraguay: Land dispute victory for displaced indigenous community

A land deal finalized this week between Paraguayan authorities and a land owner in the country's central region will allow a long-displaced indigenous community to rebuild in safety and dignity, Amnesty International said today.

For almost two decades, the Yakye Axa indigenous community have fought a legal battle to return to their ancestral lands while around 90 families were forced to live in destitute conditions alongside a nearby highway.

Years ago, private landowners moved in and took over their lands. Indigenous families were dispersed among privately owned cattle ranches, where many were mistreated and exploited.

A lawyer representing the Yakye Axa yesterday told Amnesty International that the families in the community will soon move to the newly acquired land, comprising more than 12,000 hectares within the ancestral lands of the Enxet ethnic group.

"The community is very happy. The young people, who can now build a new future, and the elderly, who fought for so many years, are in high spirits," said Julia Cabello, a lawyer and director of the Paraguayan NGO Tierraviva, which works with the Yakye Axa and other communities of the Enxet ethnic group.

In 1993, the Yakye Axa community started the legal process to reclaim a portion of their ancestral lands.

In 2005, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered Paraguay to restore the Yakye Axa's lands.

Meanwhile the conditions in the roadside encampments remained dire, with the lack of access to basic services contributing to illness and a series of preventable deaths in the community.

Once the Yakye Axa community is resettled, under the terms of the Inter-American Court ruling, the Paraguayan authorities must also set up a US\$950,000 fund aimed at community development.

The fund is destined towards educational, housing, agricultural and health projects, as well as the provision of drinking water and sanitation.

"The Yakye Axa can now rebuild a secure and stable community and live in accordance with their culture, free from the dangers they have faced for too long in the precarious roadside camps," said Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Americas Programme Director at Amnesty International.

This latest indigenous land deal comes several months after another Enxet indigenous community, the Sawhoyamaxa, negotiated an agreement in September 2011 to return to their ancestral lands. The negotiations are still ongoing.

For more than two decades, Tierraviva has been supporting indigenous communities like the Yakye Axa and the Sawhoyamaxa to return to their ancestral lands, which are vital to their cultural identity and way of life.

“We hope the Yakye Axa case becomes a positive example of the direction the Paraguayan authorities intend to take with all the unresolved indigenous land claims in the country and that the authorities will establish an effective mechanism to process such claims and make indigenous rights a key priority,” said Guadalupe Marengo.