

THROUGH OUR OWN EYES THE SAWHOYAMAXA AND YAKYE AXA

The Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa Indigenous communities are living by the side of a highway in Paraguay. For nearly 20 years they have been fighting to return to their traditional lands, which are in the hands of private owners.

For the communities, as for other Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay and elsewhere, the right to traditional lands is vital for their culture, livelihoods and way of life. The consequences for the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa of being excluded from their traditional lands are devastating. They are forced to live in temporary homes without adequate access to education, food, clean water and medical attention.

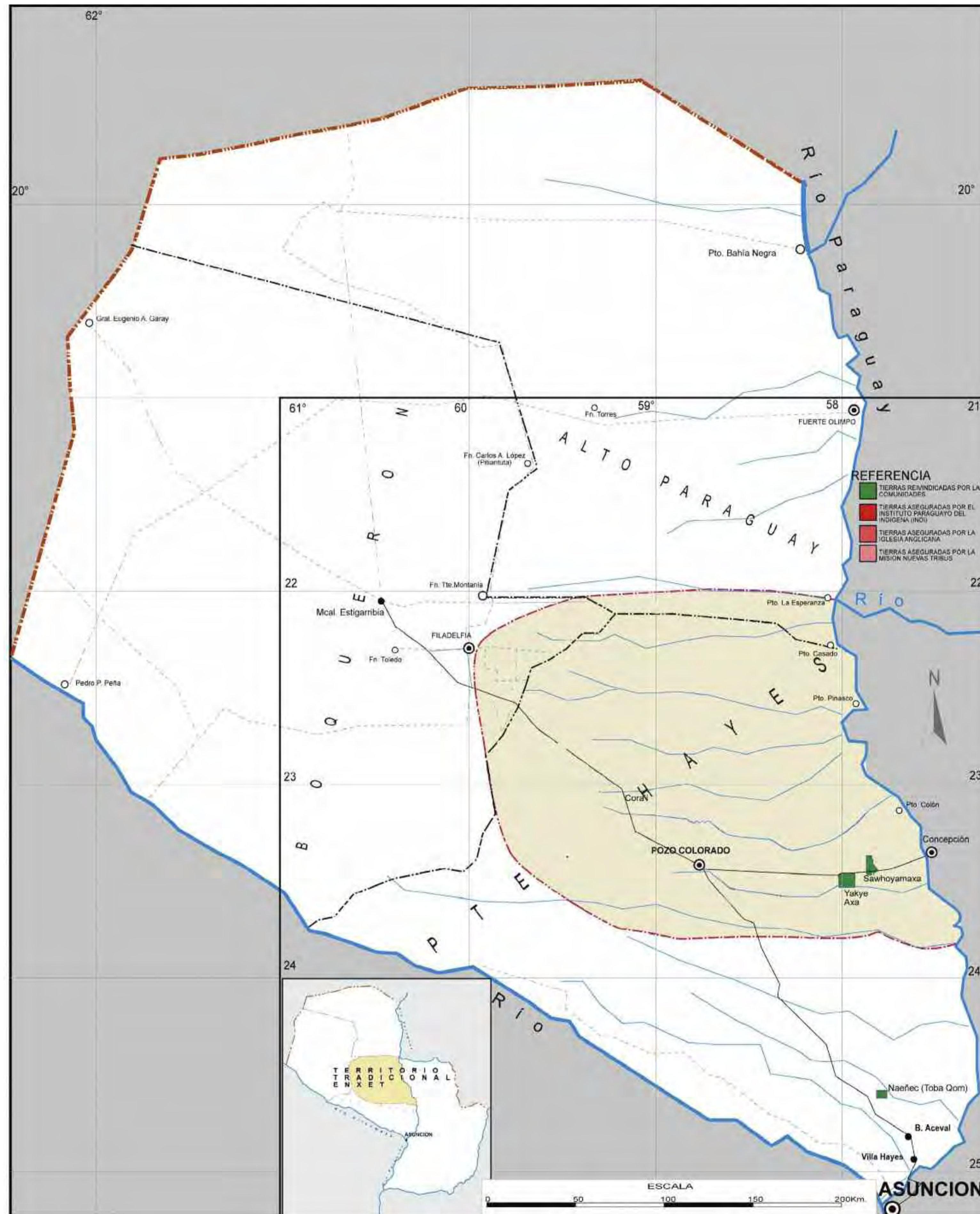
Their situation reflects in many ways the long history of exclusion and the systematic human rights violations targeted against Paraguay's Indigenous Peoples. A Truth and Justice Commission – which investigated abuses committed during the military dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) and the transition to democracy – documented violations including extrajudicial executions, slavery, sexual violence and the sale of children. The Commission found that human rights violations against Indigenous Peoples continue to occur, permanently affecting their life chances, culture and land rights.

After many years of determined struggle, and unable to get justice in Paraguay, the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa took their cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In two different decisions in 2005 and 2006, the Court ordered Paraguay to return the ancestral lands of both communities. However, despite some positive developments, Paraguay has yet to fully comply with the Court's ruling. Temporary measures ordered by the Court – such as the provision of food, drinking water and health care – have only been fulfilled in part, if at all. Meanwhile, the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa are still waiting to return to their traditional lands.

“The law is in our favour, but it is not complied with... it is only recognized on paper.”

José González, Sawhoyamaxa, November 2008

THROUGH OUR OWN EYES



“We don’t want to touch the land of the Paraguayan cattle ranchers, we’re only demanding our land, the land where our grandparents were born and buried, where we were born.”

Venancio Flores, Yakye Axa, November 2008

The lands claimed by the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa are a small part of the traditional lands of the Enxet ethnic group to which they belong.

Tensions and conflict over land ownership are a common thread running through the lives of Indigenous Peoples of many varied cultures and identities in Paraguay.

The Paraguayan Constitution recognizes the land rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, the last census in 2002 calculated that 45 per cent of Paraguay’s Indigenous Peoples did not enjoy definitive legal ownership of their land.

Broad, nationwide reforms, in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, that benefit all of Paraguay’s Indigenous Peoples, are urgently needed.



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This photo exhibition is the result of a unique collaborative project between the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa communities, and the organizations Amnesty International, Tierraviva and Photovoice.

A group of 12 young people (*nine of them shown left*) from the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa communities were trained to use digital cameras and documented their daily lives and the impact of the lack of access to their traditional land over a period of six months. The 42 photos in this exhibition are accompanied by descriptions in the words of members of the group and were chosen to express the experiences, fears and hopes of the communities.

The photos tell a story, they share a struggle and they invite you to join a campaign: the campaign for the restitution of traditional lands to the Yakye Axa and Sawhoyamaxa.

The photos can be seen at www.amnesty.org/es/region/paraguay



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THE YAKYE AXA
AND SAWHOYAMAXA

“This is the Loma Porâ ranch, the place where my community used to live. One day, one of the men who run the ranch came and told us that there was no more work for our parents and they threw us off the land; that’s why we are living on the road. The land where the ranch is is our land. That’s where we were born and where my parents, my grandparents and our ancestors were born. We had lived there for many many years.”

Felipe González, Sawhoyamaxa



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“We are living by the side of the road because we have no land. Our children play on the road; they have nowhere else to go. They could easily be run over by the lorries that speed up and down the road.”

Milciades Aponte, Yakye Axa

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“I took a photo of the bus because the President had said that when he governed, Indigenous people would travel for free. He lied. They charge more for an Indigenous person.”

Javier Florentín, Yakye Axa



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“These animals belong to our community. They are always a great help to people. They are our means of transport and take us to visit other communities.”

Felipe González, Sawhoyamaxa



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“My community’s school
where all the boys and
girls study from first to
sixth grade.”

José Florentín, Sawhoyamaxa

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“I am taking a photo of this school because we don’t have another bigger one. In this school the pupils don’t fit because it is very small. There are few places to sit. There is no school equipment. The children don’t even have shoes. In winter, the children go to school without coats, just a T-shirt and bare feet. The teacher doesn’t have the qualification given by the state that gives her the right to have a salary, state health care and a state pension.”

Javier Florentín, Yakye Axa



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“We have our own games that are part of our Indigenous culture. In this photo, the men are playing a game we call ‘Cekas’. In this game, the players gather the sticks together and throw them on the ground. If the four sticks land face down, the player scores five points. If they fall face up, then the player scores four points. Two face up and two face down scores one point.”

Milciades Aponte, Yakye Axa

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“Dance is an important part of our traditional culture. In our community, we often dance. This dance is called ‘Chokeada’.”

Javier Florentín, Yakye Axa



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**“Eight-year-old Pablo.
Sawhoyamaxa
community.”**

Édgar González, Sawhoyamaxa



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“We have no means of communication. This young woman is from the Yakye Axa community.”

Aparicio Martínez, Yakye Axa



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“This is Javier Florentín. He has lived by the side of the road for many years and he wants to return to the lands where he was born.”

Édgar Benítez, Sawhoyamaxa



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“This woman has raised her whole family living by the side of the road. She often talks about how happy life was when she lived on her ancestral lands.”

Édgar Benítez, Sawhoyamaxa



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“This Indigenous man and his son live by the side of the road. He has no work because there’s nothing you can do by the side of the road. He needs land and the land we want is the land of the Loma Verde ranch. The boy is growing up by the side of the road. He is happy to be with his dad.”

Nicolás Gómez, Yakye Axa



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“We live by the side of the road. Sometimes, the cattle ranchers try to stop us hunting on their lands. But these lands have been ours for many, many years.”

Javier Florentín, Yakye Axa



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“Here you can see our cows by the side of the road. They have nowhere to go. Just like Indigenous people, they live by the side of the road because they have no land to live on.”

José Florentín, Sawhoyamaxa



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“These are our animals. They provide us with food. It’s difficult to raise them. They feed off the land and palm hearts. They also eat what we eat. Sometimes, we don’t have anything to eat.”

Belfio Gómez, Yakye Axa



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“This is the food of Indigenous people: palm hearts. We take it from private property to eat. The palm heart is part of our culture. We have eaten palm hearts for a long time. When we return to our land, we will continue to eat palm hearts because it is a part of our culture.”

Nicolás Gómez, Yakye Axa



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*“Ysipo is a fruit that we
eat in the community.”*
Édgar Benítez, Sawhoymaxaxa



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“This is a moment of hope because we have just received food parcels and the young people are collecting them. Even the children and older people were happy because they were getting food.”

Felipe González, Sawhoymaxaxa



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“This woman cooks for her children, when she has food to cook. When she has no food, the children go hungry. The National Emergency Department brings food to the community, but only when it wants to. The food that does arrive has often gone off. We need more food.”

Javier Florentín, Yakye Axa