

Americas: Indigenous people at high risk of human rights violations

As the world marks the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, native peoples continue to be the victims of human rights violations -- including killings and "disappearances" -- in many parts of the Americas, Amnesty International said today.

"Intimidation, harassment and violent attacks against indigenous communities are frequent occurrences in countries including Honduras, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela," the organization added, calling on governments throughout the region to ensure the rights of indigenous people are fully respected.

In Colombia, indigenous communities find themselves increasingly caught up in the spiralling civil conflict and are targeted for attacks and killings both by army-backed paramilitaries and armed opposition groups accusing them in turns of collaborating with the other side.

Violence and threats against indigenous populations often take place in the context of disputes relating to the lands they live on and to the exploitation, by national and multinational companies, of natural resources on indigenous territories.

For instance, the Pemón indigenous community in Venezuela is paying a high price for opposing the construction of an electricity supply network running pylons and high-voltage cables across their lands. Members of the community have repeatedly received death threats and one of its leaders, Silvano Castro, was severely beaten and arrested in March this year as he was trying to film the army attacking non-violent Pemón protesters with tear-gas and gun-pellets.

In Brazil, leaders and members of indigenous communities are targeted with threats and violent attacks by local land-owners acting with the complicity of the authorities. The violence is rooted in the slow federal process of legalization of indigenous territories, which is fiercely opposed by land-owners.

In Colombia, members of the Embera-Katío communities of Córdoba department have come under increasing attack from paramilitaries for their campaign against plans to build a dam which would destroy much of their ancestral lands. One of their leaders, Kimy Pernia Domico, "disappeared" nine weeks ago after being abducted by paramilitaries. Other community members campaigning for his safe return have suffered harassment and one of them, Pedro Alirio Domicó was murdered also after being abducted by paramilitaries.

"In many countries in the Americas, indigenous people constitute the most marginalised and dispossessed sector of society, and are the victims of prejudice and discrimination," Amnesty International said.

"This extends to the administration of justice, where non-Spanish speaking indigenous people are often questioned by police and have their statements taken without the assistance of an interpreter," the organization added, pointing to examples of this in Guatemala and Mexico.

"Even when there are laws in place to protect them, the rights of indigenous people are still denied in practice," Amnesty International said, citing, the case of the Mexican state of Oaxaca where discrimination and human rights violations against indigenous communities continue despite the passing of the ground-breaking Law of Indigenous Customs in 1998.

In the Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, indigenous people and their community organizations often suffer human rights violations in the context of armed forces operations against insurgent groups or drug-trafficking rings.

"Human rights violations against indigenous people go virtually unchecked, which feeds a vicious circle of impunity and more violations by sending perpetrators a message that they will not be held to account," Amnesty International noted.

In Guatemala -- where those responsible for the mass-scale massacres of indigenous people during the country's long civil conflict are still walking free -- disturbing evidence indicates that former members of the civil patrols involved in past human rights violations are now carrying out attacks against indigenous communities.

In Honduras, the government's commitment to set up a special programme of investigation into at least 25 killings of indigenous leaders has so far remained on paper, and impunity continues to prevail.

Against this region-wide trend of reigning impunity, in May 2001 a court in the Brazilian state of Amazon sentenced 13 men to between 15 to 25 years' imprisonment for the death of 14 people in a gun attack on a Ticuna indigenous community in 1988.

"It has taken 13 years of tireless efforts for the Ticuna people to see justice done," Amnesty International said. "Sadly, this case remains an exception, both in Brazil and in the rest of the continent," the organization added.

"Challenging impunity is one of the crucial steps governments in the Americas must take if they want to show they are serious about their obligation to ensure the full protection of the human rights of indigenous people."

Background

Ten countries in the Americas (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru) are State Parties to the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention known as Convention 169, adopted on 27 June 1989 at the General Conference of the International Labour Organisation. The treaty aims, among other things, to protect indigenous people, to ensure their participation in any decisions which pertain to them, and to preserve their cultures. It also indicates measures which governments should adopt in order for the indigenous people to enjoy on equal terms with all other sectors of the population, the rights and opportunities that the law grants them.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>