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Paraguay: Indigenous Peoples tell their own stories

Amnesty International has facilitated a unique photographic project that helps two Indigenous communities in Paraguay tell their own stories through the pictures they take.

The organization, alongside NGOs Photovoice and the Paraguayan NGO Tierra Viva, backed the project that enables the Yakye Axa and the Sawhoyamaxa communities, who have been fighting to regain the right to live on their ancestral lands, to take photographs that reflect their struggle and tell the stories of their daily lives.

"For years, the Yakye Axa and the Sawhoyamaxa have been living on a narrow strip of land alongside a highway, while waiting to be able to return to their ancestral land. This project enables them to voice their demands, and express their hopes and expectations for the future" said Louise Finer, South America Researcher at Amnesty International.

The project is also part of Amnesty International's *Rights Journey*, a website designed to amplify the voices of those who live in poverty, and highlight the rights abuses that keep them there. It encourages people to take action and show solidarity with other individuals and communities around the world. The site shows the links between very different geographic or social situations - such as discrimination against Roma in Europe, women's safety in Nairobi's slums and the struggles of these Indigenous communities in Paraguay - and the rights solutions that would improve them.

The photographs document the land they lost, the animals they own, the school they built and their attempts to get basic services to survive in an already difficult environment.

The Yakye Axa and the Sawhoyamaxa have been fighting for more than two decades to return to their traditional land, which is vital to their identity and way of life. So far, successive governments have ignored their pleas.

"The communities' ancestral land is the basis of their culture, their spiritual life and their survival, and their photos show the urgency of their demands," said Louise Finer.

An exhibition of these photographs is being shown in the Paraguayan capital, Asunción, at the Museo de la Memoria (Museum of Memory) a place created to reflect on the abuses committed during the military dictatorships that governed Paraguay between 1954 and 1989

The slide shows

- **Through Our Own Eyes - Land.**

These are photos of the land they lost and the place they now live: the side of a highway.

A voice from the exhibition: Edgar Benítez: “Because we do not have our lands, we have to bury our dead by the side of the road”.

- **Through Our Own Eyes - Work.**

This show tells the story of how they walk long distances to hunt animals to feed the community, as well as the work women do to collect wood for cooking.

A voice from the exhibition. Javier Florentín: “Hunting in the mountains is hard. We are often thirsty, cold and tired. We walk 16km and sleep by the side of the path”.

- **Through Our Own Eyes - Water, Food and Health.**

This set shows the struggle to get food to feed the children, the long walk to the nearest pond to get clean water and the limited access they have to health care, mainly thanks to the visit of a health visitor.

A voice from the exhibition. Edgar Benítez: “At last the children have something to eat again – an armadillo. It’s a long time since the National Emergency Department came to bring us food supplies”.

- **Through Our Own Eyes - Education and Culture.**

The school that they built with their own hands is used by girls and boys to study from first to sixth grade. Sometimes, they have to attend classes outside the small classroom because it is too small to hold everybody. Despite the difficulties they face to preserve their culture because they lost their land, the communities make efforts to maintain their ancestral rites, from shamanism to games.

A voice from the exhibition. Javier Florentín: “Dance is an important part of our culture. In our community, we often dance. This dance is called ‘Chokeada’”.

- **Our Rights, Our Hopes.** Through drawings, the children of the Yakye Axa and the Sawhoyamaxa communities express their hopes that the resolutions by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which upholds their rights, will one day become a reality.

Background Information

For years, the Yakye Axa and the Sawhoyamaxa traditional lands were taken over, little by little, by private owners.

In 1991 and 1993 respectively, the Sawhoyamaxa and the Yakye Axa began the legal process to recover their land.

In 2005 and 2006, the Inter American Court of Human Rights ordered Paraguay to return the lands, but so far it has not done so. The deadlines imposed by the Court for the return of their traditional land have not been met by the government.

In June last year, the Paraguayan parliament rejected a proposal for the expropriation of land claimed by the Yakyé Axa, flaunting the orders of the Inter-American Court.

It is believed that more than 27 people from both communities have died in the last decade from preventable diseases, as a result of lack of basic medical services in their makeshift towns.

According to the last Census of Indigenous Peoples in 2002, 45 per cent of Paraguay's Indigenous Peoples do not enjoy definitive legal ownership of their land.

Links

Human Rights Journey

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/rightsjourney>