

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Paraguay to restore Indigenous community's ancestral lands**

An agreement signed by Paraguayan authorities, local companies and Sawhoyamaxa indigenous community leaders presents a key opportunity for the community to finally return to their ancestral lands, a lawyer for the Sawhoyamaxa has told Amnesty International.

Under the agreement signed this month, a government agency is due to buy a 14,404-hectare plot from two businesses based in Puerto Colón, near Concepción in Paraguay's central President Hayes region, by the end of the year.

"This agreement lays the groundwork for the restitution of the community's ancestral lands," said Ireneo Téllez, a lawyer at Tierraviva, a Paraguayan NGO that represents the Sawhoyamaxa and other indigenous communities.

"Pressure on the authorities by Tierraviva and others including international actors has led us to this positive moment for all the parties."

For two decades, some 90 Sawhoyamaxa families have fought a legal battle to return to a portion of their ancestral lands while they lived in precarious conditions alongside a nearby highway.

Years ago, landowners moved in to appropriate the Sawhoyamaxa's ancestral lands in the Chaco scrubland along the Paraguay River. Indigenous families were dispersed among several privately owned cattle ranches nearby, where many were mistreated and exploited.

In 1991, the community started the legal process to reclaim a portion of their ancestral lands.

After lodging this land claim, conditions worsened for many of the community members who worked on the ranches, and they were forced to move to makeshift settlements along the side of a nearby highway.

Members of the Sawhoyamaxa community previously told Amnesty International that living in these precarious conditions posed a threat to their safety and threatened their traditions, including their language and ties to their ancestral lands. Access to health, food and education has been sparse or nonexistent in the roadside settlements.

"My main desire is to return to our land and see my children grow up away from the highway and in better conditions", said Carlos Marecos, the community's leader, adding that he was hopeful for a happy resolution and calling on the government to avoid unnecessary delays.

In 2006, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of the Sawhoyamaxa's ancestral lands being returned to them.

The Court also ordered Paraguayan authorities to pay reparations to the families of 19 community members who died preventable deaths in the settlements, which the State has fully complied with. Authorities must also set up a US\$1,000,000 fund aimed at community development after the Sawhoyamaxa return to their land.

"While it seems that a reasonable solution has been found to restore the Sawhoyamaxa's ancestral lands, now comes the hard part, and the Paraguayan authorities must follow through and guarantee

the community's return to their traditional land without delay," said Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Americas Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"Resolving the Sawhoyamaya's land crisis will show that Paraguay is beginning to comply with its international obligations to uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights, and we hope that this will set a positive precedent for other unresolved indigenous land claims in the country."

Téllez told Amnesty International that Tierraviva continues to work with other indigenous communities in Paraguay, including others from the Enxet Indigenous People, to reclaim their ancestral lands now occupied by private landowners.