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Paraguayan Congress leaves 90 indigenous families homeless

Amnesty International today criticised the Paraguayan Congress for rejecting a draft bill that would have returned ancestral land to the Yakye Axa indigenous community, leaving at least 90 families homeless.

For 10 years, the Yakye Axa Indigenous community has lived alongside a major highway next to their land, 300 kilometres from the capital Asuncion. They lack access to water, regular food supplies, adequate medical care and land to cultivate.

"The Paraguayan Congress has sent a very clear message: they do not care about the lives of Indigenous Peoples," said Louise Finer, Paraguay researcher at Amnesty International.

"It seems that, once again, powerful interests are standing in the way of protecting the rights of the most marginalized sectors of Paraguayan society," said Louise Finer. "These lands belong to the Yakye Axa and should be returned to them immediately, their lives depend on it."

In 2005 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that the Paraguayan authorities must return the land to the Yakye Axa.

The Court set a deadline of 13 July 2008 for the return of these lands and Paraguay suggested that this could be achieved legally by expropriation. Nearly a year after the President presented this bill to Congress, it was rejected.

According to international human rights standards, the right to traditional lands is crucial to Indigenous Peoples as it is a vital element of their sense of identity, livelihood and way of life.

Official figures say there are around 108,600 Indigenous citizens of Paraguay – 1.7 per cent of the population – although this is likely to be a significant underestimate of the true figure.