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Americas: Development must not trump indigenous rights

Amnesty International today urged governments in the Americas to stop prioritizing development projects at the expense of Indigenous Peoples' rights.

The call came ahead of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People on 9 August.

"The ongoing human rights violations against tens of millions of indigenous people across the Americas are alarming", said Susan Lee, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

"After centuries of abuse and discrimination, their cultural and physical survival is at stake because there is insufficient political will to acknowledge, respect and protect Indigenous Peoples' rights when these rights are seen as obstacles to economic growth."

The expansion of agricultural and extractive industries and major development projects such as dams and roads into traditional indigenous lands are a significant and growing threat to Indigenous Peoples.

Across the Americas, Indigenous Peoples are seen as standing in the way of commercial interests, and are threatened, harassed, forcibly evicted, displaced and killed in the drive to exploit natural resources in the areas where they live.

In Brazil, for example, the construction of the Belo Monte dam on the Xingu river in the Amazon basin is going ahead despite an order from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to halt the project to fully assess its impact on the local indigenous communities.

Countries across the region – including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama and Peru – have failed to consult Indigenous Peoples before passing laws that would threaten their livelihoods. They also carried out development projects in Indigenous Peoples' ancestral lands without respecting their right to give free, prior and informed consent.

In countries such as Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Mexico, indigenous leaders and community members regularly face criminal prosecution under charges that seem to be disproportionate and politically motivated.

"Economic development doesn't have to be a zero-sum game in which Indigenous Peoples' rights are sacrificed," said Susan Lee.

"All of the countries in the Americas have endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – but states must abide by it in order to move beyond the centuries of marginalization and discrimination."