

## SURINAME

The year 2005 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Suriname's independence from the Netherlands and was also the fifth time general elections had been held. While elections have been generally free and fair since independence in 1975, Suriname has had to cope with land rights issues and periodic eruptions of violence. For this reason, the simultaneous occurrence of the anniversary and the elections attracted international attention.

The ruling "New Front" coalition lost its overall majority in the parliamentary elections of May 2005. Its presence in the 51-seat National Assembly fell from 33 to 23 seats. President Runaldo Venetiaan initially failed to secure the necessary two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. By contrast, the National Democratic Party, under former military coup leader Désiré Bouterse, doubled its tally from seven to 15 seats. The United States threatened to break off diplomatic relations and the Netherlands threatened to withhold development aid if Bouterse was elected president. The international community has viewed Bouterse with suspicion since his brutal governance during the 1980s. Venetiaan was finally re-elected, after a three-month stalemate, to a third five-year term as president in a special election among legislators in August 2005.

Approximately 50,000 indigenous and tribal residents (10% of the total population) live in over 50 villages in Suriname's interior region. Five culturally distinct groups of Maroons (Ndyuka or Aukaner, Saramaka, Paramaka, Aluku or Boni, Matawai, and Kwinti) and four Amerindian groups (Wayana, Carib, Arowaks and Trio) live along the rivers in eastern Suriname, where gold mining occurs.



## Human rights

### Racially discriminatory Mining Act

Together, the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname, Stichting Sanomaro Esa, the Association of Saramaka Authorities and the Forest Peoples Programme have submitted four reports to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (the CERD Committee). The most recent submission, in January

2005, focused on the imminent adoption of the racially discriminatory Mining Act by the National Assembly. The draft Mining Act was tabled in January 2005 pending the national elections. Now that the elections are over, however, and the same coalition of parties that previously formed the government has maintained its overall majority in the National Assembly and will again form the government, the draft Act is once again on the agenda for imminent enactment.

According to Natalie Prouvez, secretary of the CERD Committee, Suriname's draft Mining Act is racially discriminatory against the Maroons and the Amerindians for three reasons. First, it fails to recognize, guarantee and secure their rights to their lands, territories and resources; second, the act fails to protect the indigenous communities from the negative social, cultural, environmental and health consequences of natural resource exploitation; and third, the draft Mining Act does not provide indigenous and tribal communities with adequate access to the courts in Suriname to seek protection under the law. This conclusion is supported by the 2005 Inter-American Development Bank's Country Environment Assessment for Suriname (IDB 2005), which states that, by national law Amerindians and Maroons have no formal rights to land in the interior. As a result, large-scale mining and logging concessions are granted on tribal lands without prior consultation or informing the tribal people. Consequently, the new mining law was drafted without consultation of Maroon and Amerindian representatives.

In west Suriname, concessions have been granted to BHP/Billiton and Suralco/Alcoa, who plan to construct a hydroelectric dam that will force Amotopo, a Trio indigenous community, from its lands and flood the lands of at least four other communities (Wanapan, Section, Washabo and Apura). In the east, the state has granted gold mining concessions to Suralco/Alcoa and Newmont Mining on the traditional lands of the Paramake Maroon people. The indigenous people are being excluded from, and may no longer conduct subsistence activities in, these areas. According to Carlo Lewis, village chief of Apura, we are not against development, but our way of life has to be taken into account. We are already no longer allowed to hunt and we cannot go

to the supermarket like the people in the city, because we live from the forest.

### **Court case**

In August 2005, the Inter American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) gave its judgement on the Moiwana case, which was championed by human rights activist Stanley Rensch, former president of the IACHR. In 1986, during Bouterse's rule, 40 people were murdered during an attack on the N'djuka Maroon village. The massacre took place during Suriname's civil war and was one of many assaults on tribal peoples perpetrated by the military government while they sought rebel leaders throughout the country. In August 2005, the IACHR ordered Suriname to pay US\$3 million in compensation to survivors of the massacre. The Inter-American Court also ordered the government to create a development fund to support the education, health and housing of the Moiwana survivors.

### **New Association for Small-Scale Gold Miners**

In support of the expanding gold mining industry, a gold mining association is being established to organize small-scale gold miners. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Inter-American Development Bank donated US\$150,000 to finance the association. Through the organization, miners will be given information on how to improve their gold mining activities, production and price. The task of the association is to coordinate gold mining activities and make proposals regarding codes and regulations related to mining. The WWF was recently criticized, however, for excluding indigenous and tribal peoples living in the concerned territories from full involvement in meetings, discussions and decisions that shape development and environmental policy (Chapin 2004, Dowie 2005). Josin Aluma Tokoe from COICA (*Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica* – the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon Basin) has criticized the WWF for leaving out indigenous and tribal

peoples altogether from its vision of development and conservation in the Guiana Ecoregion Complex.

### **Mercury pollution – monitoring risk and reducing exposure**

An estimated 30 to 60 tons of mercury are released into the environment in the interior rain forest region along the Tapanahony River (Drietabbetje, Sella Creek and Godo Olo) each year by miners who use it to extract the gold from soil and river sediments (Pollack et al. 1998, Gray et al. 2002). Rachael van der Kooye, a Suriname national, is currently implementing an environmental awareness project in the region. Miners and people living in the surrounding villages are exposed to mercury poisoning, and it is feared that the incidence of birth defects in children and toxicity in adults is increasing as a result of mercury pollution.

In a similar initiative, tribal villagers along the lower Saramacca River asked the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund (SIHF) for help in finding a solution to the mercury problem. Villagers performed tests and showed that some people living in the area had high mercury levels in their bodies. They were worried about their children, who are most vulnerable. They want to have the option to test themselves routinely so they can monitor mercury levels over time. They would also like help in finding ways to reduce the mercury in their bodies. To accomplish this, villagers want to test different types of fish from different locations so they know which fish to select for their diet in order to reduce their risk of exposure. Finally, they are requesting health assessments to determine the effects of mercury on their community's health.

The recent development and commercialization of automated portable mercury analyzers now makes it possible to perform real-time on-site measurements of mercury bioavailability in fish and people. Proposals are now being developed to make this technology available to villages interested in the self-diagnosis of public and environmental health problems. The proposals under development are based on a

three-point plan developed by villagers that calls for a cooperative approach to monitoring risk, measuring impact and reducing mercury exposure from gold mines.

Villagers along the Saramacca River also expressed concern at the deteriorating quality of the water near their villages. The river provides fish (the main source of protein), a bathing place and water for household use. They have been observing signs of pollution in fish for some time. The fish they catch often spoils rapidly. Fish flesh is often mushy and smells bad. Fish from the Saramacca River often have strange black spots and, after cooking, dirty black foam is left on the bottom of the pan. Villagers find that the fish they have traditionally consumed is tasting worse over time. It is worth mentioning that the exact same observations were made by the Captain of Gran Santi (Lawa River) a couple of years ago. The Lawa River suffers severely from pollution due to small-scale gold mining.

Villagers lament the absence of clean drinking water. In the rainy season, they rely on rain water, which is collected in buckets or, for the better off, larger storage tanks. Until recently, water from the Saramacca River was used for consumption in the dry season. Now this is no longer an option. Water consumed during the dry season reportedly causes diarrhoea, stomach cramps and fever. In the absence of boreholes or water pumps, there is currently no other local source of drinking water. Villagers suspect that the large-scale gold mines in the area are responsible for the pollution of the Saramacca River. Another possibility is that water pollution is being caused by small-scale miners working further upstream, on tributaries of the Saramacca River.

## **Concluding remarks**

Without immediate and urgent attention, indigenous and tribal peoples - who remain without guaranteed rights and effective remedies - will suffer irreparable harm to their physical and cultural integrity and their individual and collective dignity and well-being. Indigenous and tribal communities must be consulted before the Mining Law is enacted. They must be consulted on all conservation, resource extraction

and management initiatives that directly impact on their lands. Furthermore, villagers should lead efforts to set up long-term mercury programs to monitor and mitigate the effects of mercury from gold mines on their community's and their environment's health. □

## References

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