



SURINAME

The indigenous Amerindian and Maroon people living in Suriname's southern rainforest region (the Interior) are facing the most destructive period in their history. The Amerindian people are descendents of the original inhabitants of the Amazon. Maroons are descendents of African slaves who escaped from coastal plantations, fought a war of liberation, and today live in the rainforest far removed from the areas that are economically developed. Six culturally distinct groups of Maroons [Ndyuka (Aukaner), Saramaka, Paramaka, Aluku (Boni), Kwinti and Matawai], and four Amerindian groups (Wayana, Carib, Arowaks and Trio) live in more than 50 riverside villages. Suriname's interior region covers an area of approximately 24,000 km². This region constitutes about 80% of the Surinamese land area and is home to a population of approximately 50,000 people, indigenous and tribal, representing 8% of the population. Amerindian and Maroon communities rely on subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing. Maroons, having a tradition of trade with the Dutch coastal colony, are more integrated into the cash economy than are indigenous communities.

On 28 November 2007, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) issued a ruling in the case of the Saramaka people versus the government of Suriname. Although the IACHR decision recognized the inextricable relationship between the land, including all of its natural resources, and the economic, social and cultural survival of indigenous and tribal peoples, it made it clear that international law subordinates tribal and indigenous land rights to the national community. In exchange for indigenous and tribal land conceded for economic development, the state must therefore consult the affected commu-



nities in the development planning process and they must receive reasonable benefits from the developments on their territory. The IACHR decision awarded the Saramaka people just US\$75,000 for material damages from logging and mining concessions within their territory.

Three indigenous communities, Pikin Poika, Holandsecamp and Maho were predominantly in the press in 2007 because the Suriname government had conceded their traditional lands to third parties. In Pikin Poika, the Ministry of National Resources (NH) gave more than 500 hectares of land to Stichting De Eenheid, a private investment group, to develop an art and ecotourism resort. In 2007, De Eenheid erected a fence around their concession, running right through the village of Pikin Poika, and began the construction of an eco-resort. In a statement given to the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund, one woman from Pikin Poika claimed that her home had been burned and her garden destroyed while she was in the capital receiving medical treatment

because it was on the De Eenheid concession. In a public meeting, community members stated that they had been cut off from homes, gardens and the land they depend on to live.¹

Holandsecamp faces a government plan to move the village in order to accommodate the expansion of the Johan Adolf Pengel international airport. Village leaders stated that they had been fighting to gain title of their lands for 30 years. In 2007, they were informed of the planned airport expansion, which will permanently remove them from their traditional lands.

At Maho, a concession was awarded to Stichting Moshiro, a private investment group granted land by the Ministry of Environmental Planning, Land and Forest Management (RGB). Villagers in Maho staged a hunger strike in protest, gaining national attention, and this led to heightened tensions and fears of violence

Because all land in the interior of Suriname is considered to be the property of the government (domain land), the primary laws currently in place - known as the L-Decrees - as far as possible give the indigenous people "entitlements" to their villages and agricultural plots, unless there is a conflict with Surinam's general interest. The major problem with the L-Decrees is that the entitlements only apply to their villages and the current agricultural plots and do not account for their wider territories and other lands occupied and used for hunting, fishing and other subsistence and cultural activities.

Mining in West Suriname

In 2007, in cooperation with the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS), the North South Institute, a policy research charity based in Canada, issued a report in response to the BHP Billiton and Suralco joint bauxite venture, Bakhuy, in West Suriname. The concession in question covers 2,800 km² of primary forest, from which an expected annual production of 3.2 million tons of alumina will be extracted over 40 years.

This report states that the companies' actions have not met their own policy guidelines with regard to assessing impacts at all stages of the mining cycle. No Environmental and Social Impact Assessment

(ESIA) was conducted for advanced exploration. Affected communities were not included at the earliest stages of the ESIA, being excluded from the mine site scoping stage. The traditional rights of indigenous communities were not respected and the companies refused to negotiate. The companies argued that there was no legislative framework in Suriname that obliged them to abide by their own policy to respect indigenous rights.

The report urges the companies to study the environmental and social impacts of the exploration already suffered by the indigenous and tribal communities in question, and compensate them through good faith negotiations. It further demands that the companies cease advanced exploration until they have first explored ESIA's with the affected communities, including legally binding agreements to compensate communities for impacts on livelihoods.²

Land development policies cause public health crisis

The Maroon communities of Kwakoepron, Comisaris Kondre and Maki Kriki, all less than ten kilometers downstream from Cambior's IAM gold mine, have complained to the government of Suriname that they do not have access to clean water due to mining activities. The lack of clean water is causing acute diarrhea in children. The large-scale gold-mining operation periodically releases cyanide into the Saramaka River, the only source of drinking water during the dry season (August – October). Small-scale alluvial gold mining concessions, which mine sediments directly in the river, release mercury into the water. Mercury methylization leads to fish contamination, and fish are the primary source of protein for these communities. Two dredgers, or houseboats designed for the purposes of gleaning gold from river sediments, are in operation in the area. Dredging further leads to sedimentation and the accumulation of bacteria in the water. In the statements collected by the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund in November 2007, community members blamed the Ministry of Natural Resources, which has stated that the village is too far away to deliver clean water. Community members state that the river is not usable for drinking, dishwashing, bathing or fishing. The school and clinic that

serve these three communities do not have adequate water to function properly.

Inter American Development Bank's Suriname Land Management Project cancelled

According to Annette Bettina, Natural Resource Specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the IDB Suriname Land Management Program (SLMP) was discontinued in 2007.³ Since the project to strengthen the Ministry of Environmental Planning and Forest Management (RGB) was linked to preparation of the SLMP, this was also canceled. However, the RGB and the IDB's Project for the Sustainable Development of the Interior (SU-T1026) is continuing.

The Sustainable Development of the Interior Project (SDIP), initiated in April 2007, is poised to take up the goals of the discontinued SLMP. The stated aim of the SLMP was to replace the traditional land tenure system in Amerindian and Maroon areas with an "active market system for land". An assumption underlying this open land market is that it will provide equal access to land to all market competitors, with anyone able to buy or lease at the market rate. Maroon and Amerindian peoples are at a gross disadvantage in this model, since they do not enjoy legal rights to their traditional lands and they do not have the financial or social capital to compete on the open market. The discontinuing of the SLMP therefore benefits indigenous and Maroon peoples. The implementation of the SDIP could, however, have similarly negative consequences for interior peoples.

The SDIP aims to identify which lands in the interior are currently in use using GPS technology. This information will then form the basis on which to create legislation to clarify land ownership. An assumption underlying these goals is that there is some portion of the interior that is not currently in use. Suriname's resource-rich region is inhabited by people who live in and use the forest resources for food, shelter, medicines and cultural rites. There is no region that is not inhabited. Via capacity building, the SDIP aims to bring all stakeholders under the control of the bank, with the government, traditional authorities, local organizations and NGOs being trained in project management

and loan application processes. An assumption underlying these goals is that all interior peoples wish to “develop”, or become a part of the cash economy under the bank’s supervision. Until now, the forest peoples of the interior have enjoyed self rule. Now, the aim of the SDIP is to replace self-rule with legislation defining the functions of tribal leadership, and to centralize authority under the central government.

The New Front, the current coalition government of Suriname, created the Ministry of Environmental Planning, Land and Forest Management (RGB) in order to allocate land resources along the lines of a neo-liberal program. Prior to this, the Ministry of National Resource had managed land policy. The Minister of the RGB, Michael Jong Tjien Fa, is currently the object of criticism with regard to corrupt practices. Parliamentarian Jiwana Sital has accused Tjien Fa of demanding large sums of money from individuals who are applying for domain lands. In December 2007, he argued before Parliament that more than 100 people had been the victims of the RGB’s corruption. Based on these accusations, the Chairman of the National Democratic Party (NDP), Desi Bouterse, called on President Ronald Venetiaan to close down the RGB and return the state’s land policy to the Ministry of Natural Resources (NH). The RGB is responsible for conceding traditionally held tribal and indigenous lands to third parties.

Interior villages are dependent upon their traditional lands for hunting, fishing, farming, medicines, shelter and daily necessities. As traditional lands are being taken away by the government, indigenous and tribal people are not given access to alternative sources of their basic necessities. Although current development practices tout an assimilationist model, indigenous and tribal people are, in fact, disenfranchised from the development process, and are not compensated for their losses with access to the benefits of the developed world.

Village leaders state that there is an urgent need for health services, education, transport and access to information because communities are unable to “assimilate” if they are not given the opportunity to replace their traditional practices with Western ones. Policies are being adopted, laws enacted and land conceded without village knowledge. Not only are forest peoples not consulted with regard to current development practices but they do not have an opportunity to participate in the process and, as a result, do not give their consent.

Notes and Sources

- 1 In collaboration with the University of Washington, Pudget Sound Partners for Global Health and Eclectic Reals, the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund gathered this testimony between November 2007 and January 2008.
- 2 **Weitzner V., 2007:** *Determining our Future, Asserting our Rights: Indigenous Peoples and Mining in West Suriname*. North-South Institute and the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname. Paramaribo, Suriname. www.nsi-ins.ca Last accessed January 2008.
- 3 In collaboration with the University of Washington, Pudget Sound Partners for Global Health and Eclectic Reals, the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund gathered this testimony between November 2007 and January 2008.

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