

COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS AT THE SANTA FE CONGRESS

Grace Smallwood, National Federation of Land Councils, Australia:

"I've come to the Congress to get the aboriginal point across. There is very little understanding of the oppression my people have suffered for 200 years. Even though most of the delegates at the Congress do not speak English, there have been translators, so people identify with the need for solidarity, particularly when I tell people about the appalling statistics in our country. We are 2% of the population and we have an infant mortality rate that is four times greater than the non-aboriginal Australians. Forty per cent of people in prisons today are aboriginal Australians. The latest statistics show that aboriginal unemployment is four to five times greater than the non-aboriginal people. We only received citizenship in 1967.

"I believe that all indigenous people who have been colonized are now showing solidarity. Every indigenous person at the Congress who has spoken to me, we are all dealing with the same problems, so we are now showing solidarity. It's bound to get better, since the situation we face couldn't get any worse."

Jesús Avirama, President of the Regional Indian Council of Cauca, Colombia:

"Within the past two years there has been a dramatic increase in guerrilla activity in our country, especially in the Cauca region. At the same time, the government military forces enter the area and respond with violence, but not necessarily toward the guerrilla forces, who usually flee the area. It is the Indian community that suffers. Currently there are a number of Indian communities that have been leveled by the military forces. Bombs are used indiscriminately in village areas. We are very concerned and we are asking international human rights organizations to intervene to stop the destruction and bombing. There are also many deaths as a result of actions by paramilitary troops. In the Cauca there are paramilitary groups called the Pajaros who are specially trained to kill community leaders.

"For us now, the gravest problems are the militarization, the loss of land, and our lack of civil rights."

José María Cabascanga, National Council of Indian Organizations and Communities of Ecuador:

"Indian people represent 60 per cent of the population or about 5 million people. One of the major problems that we face is that the government has become increasingly sympathetic to multinational interests such as United Fruit, which has created many problems for Indian people. The government is moving increasingly to a capitalistic right which favors multinational business and large landowners rather than the interests of the Indian people."

José María Cabascanga



Photo: S. Lobo