

THE NGOBE (GUAYMÍ) CALL FOR AN EGALITARIAN AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN PANAMA

(Panama) The Native lands of the Ngobe (Guaymí) people are located in the mountain range of Veraguas, Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro as well as on the island of Escudo Veraguas. This critically poor region is being invaded; the Ngobe are being subjected to an unjust and foreign judicial system and are struggling to survive in an inhospitable atmosphere with inadequate health care and education.

The Ngobe consist of some 110,000 people, the largest Native population in Panama. Their history of resistance and contributions remain unrecorded in the official history of Panama. Their demands for justice are not acknowledged by those in power, and they are economically discriminated against by a system which covets the natural resources found on Ngobe land.

The Ngobe have struggled for two decades to legally obtain titlement to their land. Known as the Guaymí region, the approximately 13,000 square kilometers is where they have subsisted for thousands of years and historically developed their culture. They have lost vast areas of fertile lowlands to wealthy landowners. This has resulted in an unjust, discriminatory and prejudicial relationship with local and national governments. Even in the high mountain ranges, their lands are not secure. Transnational corporations have opposed the legal entitlement of the Guaymí region because of the mineral, energy and forestry resources found there.

At a seminar on Human Rights, organized by the Guaymí Liberation Front on June 1, 1991, the Guaymí Native people and peasants presented a declaration demanding the legal recognition of the Guaymí region, a denouncement of the inefficiency of the judicial administration and human rights violations. A few days later, the Panamanian Cabinet Council announced Resolution 043-91, authorizing the Executive Body to sell Escudo Veraguas Island.

This sacred island is located in the Caribbean, inhabited by Ngobe, is a rich biological ecosystem, similar to the Galapagos Islands. Government officials ignored the presence of indigenous people, and proceeded with negotiations without their consultation. They described the Island as an "uninhabited, swampy marshland," and

"property of the State," and as such, "negotiable for sale." "They have yet to recognize its historical, sacred and ecological value.

In disregarding Indigenous land rights, the present government has demonstrated an incoherent and deficient policy. This tendency is indicated by a recent debate of the Legislative Assembly regarding Escudo de Veraguas Island: where they advocated the supremacy of commercialization over the rights of Indian people.

The Ngobe stated that the upcoming quincentenary is a "celebration of the Conquest of America and without the legal recognition of the Guaymí Region, the Ngobe are considered intruders on their own lands..." The Ngobe firmly maintain their struggle to disseminate information on the reality of indigenous people. They denounce the institutionalized genocide and discrimination of these five centuries of colonialism.

In a letter calling for solidarity from the international community, the Ngobe state "It is our responsibility as Indians to create a national consciousness, to collaborate in a peaceful and compatible manner, to respect human rights and to form an egalitarian and participatory democracy."

Please send letters calling for the legal recognition of the Guaymí Region to the President of Panama and copies of these along with letters of solidarity.

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