

URACCAN Offers Degree in Indigenous Rights

"For more than five centuries others have spoken for us. Today we want to begin to speak with our own voices on this October 12, when we commemorate once more the history of resistance of Indigenous peoples of the American Continent and as we launch a Degree Course in Indigenous Rights in our own university"— **URACCAN, the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua**

With that invocation to the more than 500 years of Indigenous resistance on the American Continent, Dr. Mirna Cunningham, Rector of the new university URACCAN, began her address inaugurating a degree course in Indigenous Rights—a speech that showed that this new post-secondary educational institution in Nicaragua is dedicated to take the forefront of the struggle to defend and extend the rights of the Caribbean Coast peoples. Above all, URACCAN will be innovative and open to serve the real needs of the Caribbean Coast mosaic of minority peoples—Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Garifuna, Blacks—who have been historically marginalized and oppressed by the Nicaraguan state. It will also reinforce the autonomous status of the Caribbean Coast area of Nicaragua by forming local experts in the fields of natural resource management who can prevent the exploitation of coastal resources by outside forces.

The degree course in Indigenous Rights, inaugurated in Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas), capital of the RAAN (North Atlantic Autonomous Region), is supported and financed by a coalition composed of the internal budget of URACCAN, the Nicaraguan state, and International NGOs. It is a Bachelor level diploma that will be recognized as a basis to enter Master or Doctoral level degree courses in Nicaragua. The URACCAN Department supervising this course is headed by Yuri Zapata; courses will be taught by Dr. Hazel Lau, a well known Miskito leader and lawyer.

"We are merely demanding," Cunningham asserted, "a fundamental

right for Indigenous peoples and ethnic communities of the Caribbean Coast...our systematic and effective participation in the development of our own educational program." The national educational system and national universities, she says, have "no roots in our culture and thus [cannot] respond to the urgent problems of our communities."

Mirna Cunningham is well known as a continental Indigenous leader. In 1992 she presided the work of convoking and assembling the Third Continental Encounter of Indigenous, Black, and Grassroots Resistance, held in Managua. She is a member of the Nicaraguan Parliament representing the Puerto Cabezas (Bilwi) region. She is also one of the principal architects of the autonomy process that led the Sandinista government in 1987 to enact the Autonomy Law, a Constitutional provision that recognized autonomous status for the north and south Caribbean Coast regions.

Indigenous peoples on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast face severe marginalization. Unemployment in the RAAN is now around 90%, and for the RAAS (South Atlantic Autonomous Region) it is 70%. The Atlantic Coast area has the highest levels of mortality for early maternity. Three out of every four unemployed persons are women, and there is an increase in rape and abuse brought about by social decomposition and drug consumption.

Francisco Cambell, who recently travelled to the US in search of further support for the program, spoke eloquently of URACCAN's historical place

in the lives of the Black and Indigenous peoples of the coast. "The Autonomy Process was the greatest historical shift from the liberal, nationalist ideology that to be Mestizo and Catholic is the only legitimate form of belonging and identity. Now, the peoples of the region say, 'We will build our university.'"

The establishment of an Indigenous Rights curriculum will further the autonomy process in the Atlantic Coast region by giving local peoples the educational training necessary to build the juridical framework for the reclaiming of the native economy and political system. In addition, the program will do this in a way that respects the various cultural expressions present on the Caribbean coast: "unity in diversity," which must also integrate the cosmopolitanism of the Black Caribbean community. It will also decentralize the whole process of education, taking students into coastal communities for workshops, seminars, and open-ended, participatory sessions. The course, however, is offered only on the Bilwi campus, which will favor Miskitos over Sumus because of its location. Hence the need to open another program in the Bonanza region to the benefit of the Sumu communities. ♡

Adapted from a text by Felipe Stuart Courneyeur

For information about URACCAN contact:

URACCAN, Edificio El Carmen del Canal 4 1/2c. al sur, Managua, Nicaragua; Tel: 505-2-682-143; Fax: 505-2-682-145; or fstuart@uugate.uni.rain.ni; Fax: 505-2-682145