



Argentina

The Mataco of the Gran Chaco

HARASSED AS THEY FACE CHOLERA OUTBREAK

More than one hundred Mataco and Toba people who have lived for centuries in the Gran Chaco, a territory that comprises the colonial boundaries between Bolivia, Argentina and Paraguay, are facing incredible hardships due to an outbreak of cholera on the Pilcomayu River where they traditionally fish. Local authorities have been accusing the Mataco of being responsible for the cholera outbreak, and have closed off the Mataco's territory, not allowing them to leave, nor allowing people to enter their territory. This forced isolation by the Argentinian authorities has led the Mataco to denounce their discriminatory treatment. "Our source of life is the Pilcomayu river. If we are not allowed to fish there, we will die not of cholera, but of hunger," said Noe and Martin Bravo. The Mataco harvest squash and watermelon on their tiny plots of land, but they have been forbidden to sell, buy, or exchange with local merchants. Mataco Indians also live from selling folk art, and their small surplus of produce and fruits. "Authorities do not allow us to leave or travel," a Mataco Indian recently reported in

Tartagal. Gerardo Tortelli, a medical doctor who lives in Salta, arrived in Misión La Paz and said that, "drinking water in this area is contaminated with cholera, but we cannot do much about it, except to tell people to add the chlorine we are distributing to the water, and to boil it before drinking."

Landowners in Salta, Argentina, have used the cholera epidemic to accuse Indian communities of hosting such diseases. Journalists asked Health Minister Julio César Aráoz, if it was true that local landowners had said that "due to a bunch of shitty Indians our Province will lose a lot of money." The Minister answered, "Whoever is thinking that way is stupid and inhuman... What I am interested in is not the Salta landowners, but people infected with cholera, and not trying to confine it to this sector [the Indians']. Afterwards we will talk to the landlords."

Local landowners, exporters of fruits and produce, have pressured Health Minister, Julio Cesar Araoz into not reporting the presence of cholera in Salta, "because the cholera presence would affect the export and sales of our produce on the market."

Health Secretary Alberto Mazza reported to President Menem, the press corps and administrators in Tartagal, that the total number of people with cholera has risen to 154 cases. Mazza also noted that the cholera type is different from that in Bolivia and Peru, and that most of the affected people are children.

Source: *El Tribuno (Jujuy)* and written by journalists Diana Alvarez and Walter Echazu

The following is excerpted from a letter to the newsletter in *Boletín de las Comunidades Aborígenes* December, 1991

I am writing to inform you that our work continues at our own pace: we are preserving the production of quinoa and kiwicha seeds, and it looks like some small farmers in the south of Mendoza are seriously considering cultivating them commercially. We are in touch with a similar group in Bolivia with whom we are attempting to resolve some of the problems we are having.

We recently completed 54 houses in rural areas utilizing our traditional technology and we colored them with paints which were used by our ancestors thousands of years ago. We even extracted them from the same sources our ancestors used!

We continue to videotape life in the Andean world. We have taped more than 100 hours which will be edited as soon as we have the opportunity.

We have finished installing the offices for Radio FM Pirca in Tilcara. Occasionally, we have been able to air our programs thanks to borrowed equipment.

Well, the struggle continues, with all the usual problems. Nevertheless, we are progressing.

Please receive from all of us a fraternal hug.

Armando Alvarez

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