

# Amazonian Leaders Meet World Bank President

Three leaders from the Coordinating Committee of the Indian People of the Amazon Basin (La Coordinadora) met with the president of the World Bank in Washington, D.C., in December to discuss Indian objections to economic development projects financed by the bank.

Evaristo Nugkuag (Aguaruna Nation), president of La Coordinadora and of the Inter-Ethnic Development Association of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSESP); José Narciso Jami-joy (Kamsa Nation), secretary of the National Indian Organization of Colombia (ONIC); and José Uranavi (Huarayo Nation), president of the Indian Federation of Eastern Bolivia (CIDOB), also met with officials of the Inter-American Development Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

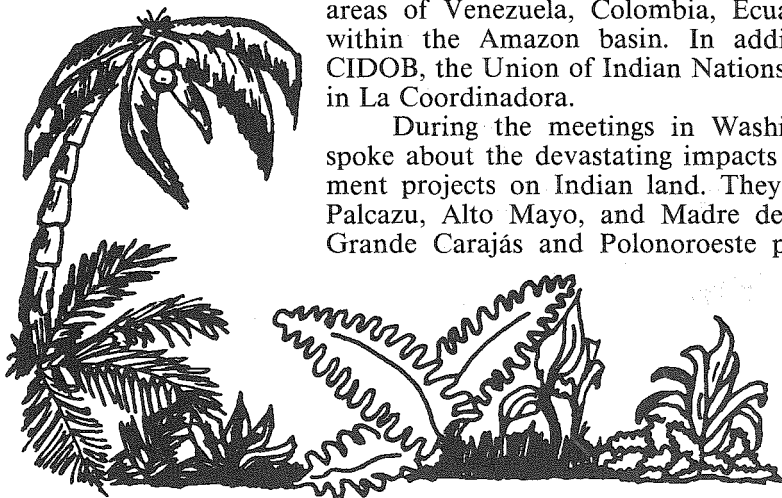
Before arriving in Washington, the group traveled to Sweden, where Evaristo was presented with the Right Livelihood Award, commonly known as the Progressive Alternative Nobel Prize. On accepting the award, Evaristo affirmed that, "This award is not just for me, but for the entire organization and for all my Indian brothers and sisters in the Amazon region."

Lobbying major institutions which finance development projects in the Amazon is part of a larger strategy by Indian people to affirm their right to land, self-determination, and life itself. Before the arrival of the first Europeans in the early 1500's, there were at least six million Indian people living in the Amazon basin. Disease, massacres, slave raiding, and the undermining of the environment on which Indian cultures depend have resulted in a drastic reduction in Indian population. In this century alone, 90 groups have disappeared, and today fewer than a million Indian people live in the region.

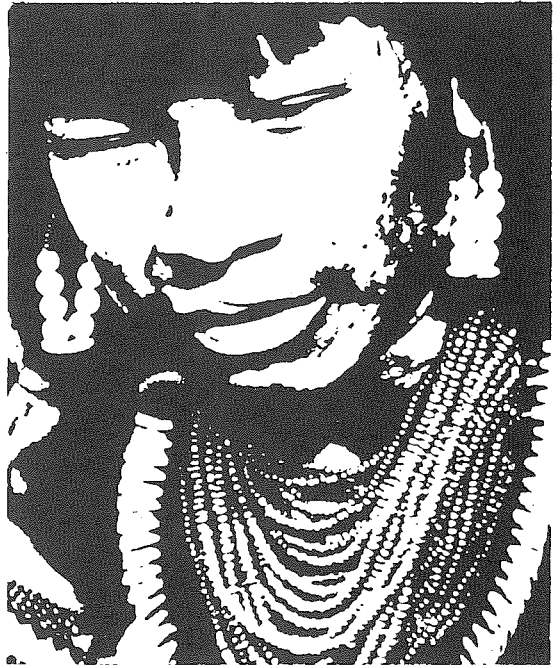
Evaristo said in Washington that La Coordinadora has been formed "to speak out about our situation, to get in touch with the national governments where we are located, and to keep close contact among Indian nations of the different countries in order to get to know specific problems better, and in that way to help find favorable solutions." Although many people from outside South America associate the Amazon primarily with Brazil, significant areas of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia also lie within the Amazon basin. In addition to AIDSESP, ONIC, and CIDOB, the Union of Indian Nations (UNI) of Brazil also participates in La Coordinadora.

During the meetings in Washington, the three Indian leaders spoke about the devastating impacts of large-scale economic development projects on Indian land. They specifically identified the Pichi-Palcazu, Alto Mayo, and Madre de Dios projects in Peru and the Grande Carajás and Polonoroeste projects in Brazil. Evaristo said,

"For example, there are projects financed by the World Bank or USAID in which a road is constructed. This road brings very negative consequences for Indians since we ourselves did not request it, and since we know that the



road, once constructed, gives tremendous economic benefit to those who are financing it and who have capital. We Indians are not the ones who derive benefit from this road because we have no way to exploit the natural resources or to transport them to urban centers in a way that even remotely benefits us. Those who benefit are the companies that have extensive capital to bring in industrial products via this road to the Indian communities, and, in return, take from our area the natural resources, such as timber. So as they advance into the rainforest with the road, they carry destruction with them. The companies and the individuals that are interested in exploitation only come here for a short time, taking advantage of the timber, or exploiting anything they can. When they are finished, they return to where they live, and all of us Indians are left for the rest of our lives without resources, because for us resources are the animals, the birds, the river and all the other beings that make up the natural world.



“These development projects have a profound effect on the ecological equilibrium, and the entire environment is left contaminated. For example, if they begin to drill for oil, the rivers become contaminated and the fish die, and the fish are a source of food that we Indians have always consumed. Right now the animals are scarce, and, of course, people become sick. All of this results from the construction of the road into the area. Those are the worries that we communicated to the Bank.”

The Indian leaders delivered a letter to the World Bank which requested the Bank's action of the following points:

- “That the World Bank recognize the existence of Indian communities in the areas of development projects which the Bank finances.
- “That the World Bank establish direct contact with Indian organizations through the organizations' own representatives.
- “That the World Bank consider the direct and active participation of Indians elected for that purpose by their organizations in the planning and execution of projects financed by the Bank in areas where there are Indian people.
- “That the World Bank keep us informed, through our organizations, regarding the Bank's plans for the financing of new projects and regarding the projects which are in progress in regions where there are Indian people.
- “That the World Bank clarify for us its policy regarding Indian people and provide us with a written copy of this policy. Here we refer to the Bank's publication *Tribal People and Economic Development* and also to the Bank's Operational Manual No. 2.34.”

The meetings in Washington were arranged by Oxfam America, Survival International, and the Right Livelihood Foundation.