

Peruvian State Targets “Abandoned” Lands of Asháninka

Photo: Mino Eusebio Castro



After days of march, “displaced” Asháninka widows and orphans arrive at a community in search of protection from Shining Path violence.

Since about 1989, Asháninka communities in the Selva Central region of Peru have been the object of Shining Path guerilla violence. The civil war has led to increased colonization from the highlands into Asháninka areas. Faced with extermination, Asháninka communities have had to leave their lands, clearing the way for state-sponsored colonist land invasions. In this interview, Mino Eusebio Castro, vice-president of the Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rain forest (AIDSESP, a national coordinating body for Indigenous regional organizations representing over 500,000 Indigenous people living in the Peruvian rain forest), talks with SAIC about the people’s hardships and their efforts to organize and save their communities.

Interview with Mino Eusebio Castro

Tell us about yourself and your community.

My name in my maternal language is Naaperori Shirampari Asheninka, in Spanish it is Eusebio Castro. I am Asháninka. The Asháninka are one of 63 groups that inhabit the Amazon region of Peru. Traditionally, the Asháninkas were a warrior society that controlled a magical area. We lived from resources such as hunting, fishing and trade with other Indigenous communities. But all that changed, and our history became conquered by lies and broken promises. We tried to reject tokens brought to us, but there were many abuses and violations. Our Indigenous rights were violated, and many of our women were raped. In some cases, we were enslaved.

What have been the major threats to the Asháninka?

The exploitation of lumber by colonists has resulted in much violence. The guerrilla groups Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) have also violated Indigenous rights. They have oppressed us and killed bilingual teachers and leaders. Although we tried to resist, we did not have sophisticated weapons. If we did defend ourselves and killed someone, the Peruvian Constitution declares that we would be tried as murderers. Thus by justice, we were between two fires as it is said.

When did the intrusion of the Shining Path into

the Asháninka communities begin?

It began in 1978 and 1979, and by 1980 there was incursion into our areas, not with violence, but with lies, so we would become their strength. By 1989, there was an uprising in the Pichis valley to reject the revolutionary movement. The MRTA kidnapped and killed our hero Alejandro Calderon. As a result, many leaders rose up to protest and counter this force. By 1991, we were able to expel all those guerrillas who had infiltrated the Pichis Valley.

The Shining Path entered our communities in 1993 which resulted in the massacre of the Chiriary community in the region of Satipo. About 57 people were killed (see *Abya Yala News*, Vol. 7, Nos. 3 and 4). Presently, we have more than 39 communities that have disappeared. Many people have been displaced and are refugees.

We have organized ourselves into self-defense groups. We asked the military if they would be willing to collaborate with us to achieve peace. We want peace.

You have made an alliance with the military with a goal of pacification, yet, according to international information, many of the those killed have been as a result of the military. Do you have faith in the military or was it through circumstances that you had to make a necessary pact?

This is not our war. The military does not know who is who. We indicated that since we know the territory, we should help defend it, but we were not given sufficient arms to confront the guerrillas. Who cares when an Indigenous person is killed? No one. When one of the military dies, then it is another story. They are made into heroes. When an Indigenous person dies in defense of his territory, no one says anything.

What were the guerrillas and military disputing in the region?

Until now the struggle has been for power. The Shining Path wanted to gain more power by using the Indigenous people in the war against the state, but since we are dedicated to peace, we did not concede easily.

How is AIDSESEP preparing for the defense of territories, for maintaining biodiversity, and assuring a future for the Indigenous communities of the Amazon?

In AIDSESEP we have a program of establishing communal reserves. In the zone of Guayali, we have gained more than 100 property titles for the communities. There are still 80 left that need to be signed. There are many blocks through the Ministry of Agriculture because of lobbying of lumber companies.

In the new Peruvian Constitution, articles 82 and 83 have decreed that our lands can be seized if they are deemed "abandoned" by the state. They can then be bought by those who have the most economic power, like the petroleum companies.

Do you have lands that you consider abandoned?

Traditionally, for us there are no abandoned lands, because we view land space in an integral manner. We are trying to take initiative in protecting and in managing the rich biodiversity of the area.

What have been the major developments surrounding petroleum companies in Indigenous areas of the Peruvian Amazon?

The Candoshi community has been the most affected by oil exploitation. It is located in the northern region by the Marañon and Pastaza rivers. Occidental Petroleum has bought lot number four. The Candoshi reject this completely. AIDSESEP and the Candoshi community have staged protests and put pressure on the government arguing that this was not done with the consent of the Candoshi community.

AIDSESEP has sent letters of protest to Occidental Petroleum, yet their responses are vague, stating that they are concerned about the environmental impact. But a few months ago we verified that there was a major oil spill on the Pastaza River. This means that all the flora and fauna will be poisoned. In addition, the Candoshi will not be able to subsist on hunting and fishing. In the San Juan community, the oil company has been offering to pay people to relocate to another area. They have come in with clothing and medicine. The Candoshi general council declared that they do not recognize these actions as legitimate. They took back all the things given to the families, and the company was told to leave. This has created quite a reaction from the company as well as the Ministry of Energy.

Is there much contamination in the rivers?

There is mercury in rivers such as Madre de Dios. Some of the people have eaten contaminated fish and have become very ill. As you know mercury is deadly. In the Chanchamayo and Perene Rivers, there has been so much mineral waste that all of the fish have been killed.

Has a political movement formed to stop this contamination?

Various environmental and ecological organizations have tried to raise public awareness, but to date the government has not imposed any regulations to stop the dumping of mineral waste. ☺