

Emergency Support Needed!

Paez People left Homeless, Injured, Orphaned by Earthquake in Southwestern Colombia

Eighteen Indigenous communities disappeared beneath tons of mud and rock after a massive earthquake registering 6.3 on the Richter scale struck northern Colombia's remote Cauca region which is inhabited primarily by Indigenous people. The quake struck on June 6, with its epicenter close to the town of Torbio, releasing a series of debris slides and flooding of the Paez and Moras rivers. The list of dead, disappeared and injured grows daily. Indigenous organizations report that government aid to the survivors has been slow and totally insufficient, and that many injured have not received treatment and that people are dying from infection. Official calculations, acknowledge 857 deaths and close to 15,000 injured, but there is no precise information on the number of victims or the conditions of the survivors. A leader of the Vitaco Indigenous reserve site of a major avalanche, claimed that at least half of the 4,000 Indigenous inhabitants of this locality had been buried.

The National System for Prevention and Attention to Disasters announced that "given the magnitude of the quake' aftershocks, new rock slides could fall from the Nevado del Huila [mountains] which could cause increases in the Paez river's levels." In turn this could result in the flooding of more communities. On the 9 of June, the affected communities were again pan-

icked by tremors with intensities varying from 4.0 to 4.8 on the Richter scale.

Emergency aid provided by Colombians and international organizations has been essential in saving hundreds of unprotected Indigenous people's lives. However, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) calls for individuals and agencies to take into account, not only the immediate situation, but also the communities future. Of particular concern has been a campaign, promoted by portions of the national press, for the adoption of Indigenous children by people outside the region. This is an attack on the autonomy for which Indigenous communities have struggled for years. Additionally, ONIC is concerned with the process of resettling those who have been displaced from their land, stating, "land isn't just a material element, but the essence of their cultures".

Its recovery has cost many lives, as well as much pain and suffering. Now, the displaced people find themselves set back to step one. Delimitation of new Indigenous reserves is urgently needed. Its also critical to urge governments who are supplying aid that these funds be channeled through Indigenous organizations in a way that establishes a true network of solidarity with the affected communities. The Colombian government has been slow to recognize Indigenous organizations juris-

dition within the disaster area.

ONIC's Executive Committee and the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) is urgently international aid and solidarity. In order to send information regarding the possibilities for support in this state of emergency communicate with CRIC at Fax: 928-233893.

Donations can be sent directly to the ONIC bank account in Colombia:

BANCO DE BOGOTA, Cuenta No. 051-06327-9, DAMNIFICADOS INDIGENAS DEL CAUCA-ONIC.

Or in the US, to:

ABYA YALA FUND,
c/o Tides Foundation,
DAMNIFICADOS INDIGENAS
DEL CAUCA-Colombia, 1388
Sutter St. 10 floor, San Francisco
CA 94109

