

Wichí:

Fighting for Survival in Argentina

Photo: © John Palmer/Survival

"We call the colonists ahatai which is like our words for 'spirit of the dead'(ahat) and for 'the devil'(Ahataj). When they first arrived (in 1902-3) their foods were unfamiliar to us. Our grandparents were afraid of the flour the ahatai gave them, thinking it might be poisonous. So they left it boiling on the fire, afraid that they would die if they ate it. Then one old woman said to her children, 'I am old and haven't long to live, so I'll try it. If I die from it, you'll know not to eat it.' And so we learnt to eat ahatai foods."

Standing waist-deep in the muddy water, holding nets strung between two poles, the Wichí fisherman detects the fish by noting movements in the river's surface. Plunging the net over the fish and swinging downward, the catch is enveloped in the trap. Swiftly and with minimal impact on the aquatic environment, a natural resource yields a nutritious meal. The fisherman's serenity, however, belies the deepening crisis faced by the Wichí people: For 90 years, they have endured the gradual

takeover of their land by outsiders. What was once a fertile grassland dotted with bushes and trees has become a dry, sandy desert, and with the shimmering chest-high grasses have gone many of the animals the Wichí used to hunt. Today, although numerically the Wichí are not in danger of disappearing, their traditional way of life is vanishing as the outside world slowly closes in. In response, the Wichí are organizing and trying desperately to secure their land.

The occupation of the Wichí peo-

ple's land attests to an Argentinian version of "Manifest Destiny," the guiding ideology behind the colonization of the North American West. Since the arrival of Europeans, but particularly since the turn of the century, the Wichí have suffered continuous harassment, interspersed with serious bouts of violence in which large numbers of Indigenous people were killed. Along with disease, the well-armed settlers introduced herds of cattle, which devastated the fragile arid landscape.

Today, the Wichí are still fairly

numerous. Estimates range from 20,000 to 50,000 Wichí living in south-eastern Bolivia and northern Argentina, in a semi-arid region known as the Chaco. Wichí villages have their own territory, but often six or seven villages will share the use of the overlapping areas. Each community usually consists of one or more clans. People belong to their mothers' clans; in matrilineal Wichí society, men move to their wife's village upon marrying.

The Wichí people live in an intimate relationship with their surroundings. Their small houses of mud, branches and leafy boughs are well adapted to the scorching temperatures that reach 50° C in the shade in summer. During the dry winter months they depend on fish from the Pilcomayo River. In the wet summers, they cultivate corn, watermelons, beans and pumpkins grown in their gardens, which they encircle with thorny branches to try to prevent the settlers' cattle from invading. They hunt deer, armadillo, peccary and iguana, and search for wild honey throughout the year. Members of some of the neighboring peoples—the Iyojwaja, Nivaklé, Qomlec and Tapy'y—often live amongst the Wichí, sometimes marrying into their society.

While the Wichí have always known periods of hunger, never has life been as hard as it is today, with most of the animals gone, and their environment drastically desertified—a sandy desert where a grassland ecosystem once thrived.

According to UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme), 'desertification' is not the spread of deserts but the creation of desert-like conditions in the dry lands, which make up 35 per cent of the Earth's land surface. It is a phenomenon which it estimates may threaten the livelihood of one billion people worldwide, including the Wichí. In November 1995, a coalition of donors, governments, NGOs and grassroots groups met in a two-day conference convened by the UN International

Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to single out efforts to combat desertification as a top priority.

For the Wichí, desertification translates into starvation; starvation because their traditional sources of food are disappearing. In the winter they depend on fish from the Pilcomayo river and in the summer on vegetables grown in their gardens on what little land they have left. All too often, the settlers' cattle trample the gardens, undaunted by the Wichí's fences of thorn bushes. The wild fruits and berries they used to gather and the animals they used to hunt are gone. Now, even the Pilcomayo river is threatened by the Hidrovía development project (see below).

Underlying all these problems is the state government of Salta province and its continuing refusal to grant the Wichí title to their territory. In the area under dispute, known as State Plots 55 and 14, which comprise about 138,000 and 186,000 acres, respectively, live about 5,000 Wichí, along with a few small communities of Chorote, Toba and Chulupí peoples.

In 1987, the provincial government passed a new law that recognized the settlers as having legal rights to the land, and proposed to give each settler, as well as each of the 30 Wichí communities in the area, title to a small parcel of land. By this time, the settlers had established themselves on the most fertile areas of land, and the Wichí knew that such an action would split up the region into hundreds of pieces, jeopardizing their access to much of the land. This would not only be intolerable but was also illegal under international and Argentinian law.

In 1991 the Indians, working with Survival International, an NGO based in England, prepared a land claim report that demonstrated that at least 162,000 acres spread over the two State Plots traditionally belonged to them. Later that year, the provincial Governor signed a decree (No. 2609/91) recognizing that the area was indeed Indigenous land, and pledging to recognize this in law. The succeeding Salta government failed to take any decisive action, and allowed the situation to deteriorate dramatically. Shortly before leaving office at the end of last year, the same government presented a draft



Wichí fisherman on the Pilcomayo river.



Photo © John Palmer/Survival

Wichi men enjoy roasted fish on a honey collecting trip.

land bill to the provincial parliament that is completely against the interests of the Indians and, if approved, would deprive them of huge tracts of their territory.

As a result of the general disintegration of the environment, the non-Indian criollos are also becoming poorer. But in a desperate attempt to salvage a living, they are increasingly preventing the Indians from using the few remaining fertile areas. Men are barred from hunting (sometimes at gunpoint), women gathering wild fruits are threatened, and in some cases the Indians have even been denied access to much-needed water holes. The criollos' cattle, no longer having grass to feed on, invade the Indians' vegetable gardens, often destroying a whole crop overnight.

"They threaten us saying, 'Indian, don't come around here. I own this land and I don't like Indians on it. If you want to hunt here, you must ask for my permission - or I'll kill you.' ...They don't own those resources. The things that we Wichi live on do not belong to anyone. They belong to God," a Wichi man was quoted saying in a 1994 report by Survival International.

Under pressure to integrate its economy into the emerging Mercosur

free-market system, the Argentinian government undertook a regional development plan linking Paraguay with northwestern Argentina and, ultimately, Chile with Brazil and the Pacific with the Atlantic. This 'development' process means that Indigenous peoples will be gradually pushed out, and that the conflicts over land will intensify.

Without the slightest consultation of the Wichi, a bridge is currently being built across the Pilcomayo River (which forms the border between Argentina and Paraguay) beside an Indian village called Nop'ok 'Wet (La Paz). The Wichi were told that their village is scheduled to be replaced by a frontier town. In addition, the government plans to construct a major highway that would cut through Wichi territory to link this town with Tartagal.

The massive Paraguay-Paraná Hidrovia industrial waterway project is also part of that plan. The project is headed by the five governments of the La Plata basin. It would require widening and deepening the channels of the Paraguay and Paraná rivers, South America's second largest water system, to allow ocean-going ships access to the port of Cáceres, Brazil, 2,100 miles upstream from the river's mouth. Under the plan being studied, the rivers would

be channeled, straightened, and dredged, with tributaries of the river blocked off and rock outcroppings in the channel detonated. The Pantanal, the world's largest wetland, figures among the 93 sites needing dredging.

For the Indigenous peoples dependent on the rivers targeted by Hidrovia, which includes the Wichi, the environmental impacts could be devastating, worsening their already precarious living conditions. (See article page 30)

In 1990, the Wichi chose a course of action. They contacted Survival International, requesting the help of two anthropologists they trusted. They reasoned that the government might revoke the law if it could be shown that the whole area was Wichi land, and had been so for hundreds of years. They wanted the government to recognize their land rights and remove the settlers. They decided to carry out a census of all the Wichi in the region; to make a map of every village; to record an oral history of life on their lands before and after colonization; and most importantly, to compile one large map of the entire region, showing all the places used and named by the Wichi. This would provide irrefutable evidence of their intimate knowledge of the land.

On August 7, 1991, the report and map were formally presented to the provincial governor. Later that year, only hours before he left office, he signed a decree recognizing the Wichi's ownership of the land, and confirming that they should be awarded a single, communal title to the entire area.

As a result of the project the Wichi decided to form an organization through which they could be represented in meetings with government officials. They called it Thaka Honat (Our Land). Now, every village sends representatives to its meetings. 🐾

Despite the existence of the Decree, the Wichi have still not received title to their

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and integrity of ecosystems must be recuperated, especially in degraded areas of critical importance for the structural restoration of hydrological systems. Proposed actions such as permanent dredging and the construction of dams for water regulation or for sediment retention do not constitute solutions, but rather threats. They do not look at the true causes of problems of sedimentation of river beds and deterioration of hydrological systems, but rather the maintenance of the predatory system which only seeks economic benefits for large corporations, while financial and environmental costs are paid by populations and by nature.

The infrastructure to be implanted in the region must be in function of the

needs of local populations and not external interests. Respecting this criteria, all initiative must have as its origin and finality the needs and interests of local communities. Even so, its implementation must adapt itself to natural conditions, avoiding negative social and environmental impacts. The governmental project for the Paraguay-Paraná industrial waterway does not respond to either of these criteria. This project, designed behind the back of populations of the region, will not bring any benefits nor solutions for the needs of the peoples of the Basin, but rather will increase even more their problems, generating greater impacts and increasing social and environmental costs, many of them irreversible.

The existing resources destined for mega-projects promoted by international financial institutions and entities of cooperation must be re-directed toward the true needs of local populations, moving away from their current orientation to promote unsustainable projects which only benefit those small groups in whose hands power and resources are concentrated.

From the curves of the Paraguay River, July 27, 1996

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land. In 1994, they made their first trip outside their land to speak at the United Nations about their plight. In continuation, we reproduce the latest attempt by the Wichí to secure their territory.

For the Titting of Our Land: Takeover of the International Bridge Over the Pilcomayo River (La Paz)

Many years have passed since we requested the government of Salta province, Argentina, to officially grant us title to the land that we have always inhabited. We have sent letters. Meetings take place, new laws and decrees are passed, and yet more topographic studies... We are now in the fourth administration. Yet they have not responded to our demands. Years pass and our lands become impoverished, because the people who have come from the outside to occupy them know not how to manage them. Years pass and we become poorer.

Even though we have official papers making

us Argentineans, they don't respect us. They don't recognize this land as ours. They play around, saying "Wait just a little bit more." But while we wait, they move ahead with their projects: They settle our land, lay down their roads, their barb-wire fences, and their towns. And now they are building a bridge in La Paz and they that we have to pack up and give them space.

We are not animals running loose. We are not dogs to be driven away at the whims of their owner. We are the flowers of the Earth, planted by God Himself to live and thrive in these lands.

We have asked the authorities to secure the titles to these lands before undertaking these large projects in the places where we live. These are fiscal lands and the laws therefore recognize our right of ownership. Amidst all this talk of Mercosur, we see a more secure future simply in the ownership of our land.

Faced with no response and the upcoming inauguration of the bridge, the 35 communities belonging to our association have decid-

ed to peacefully takeover the lands around the bridge on the 25 of August. We will occupy the land until the government of Salta gives a concrete response in regards to our requests. This is an act of hope.

We ask that you collaborate, by sending people who believe in our cause to accompany us and assure that there be no acts of violence against our families.

Even after the takeover, you can support our cause by sending letters to:

Sr. Gobernador de la Provincia de Salta, Dr. Juan Carlos Pomero, Casa de Gobierno, Gran urg 4400, Salta, Argentina

Sr. Presidente de la República Argentina, Dr. Carlos S. Menem, Casa Rosada, Capital Federal, Argentina; Fax: 54 1 343 2249 or 54 1331 7976

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