

Awastingni Sumo Defend Autonomy of Coast Against Government

Effort is to stop Asian logging giants from further destroying Indigenous lands on the coast of Nicaragua

The situation concerning the Sumo of Awastingni of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua in the Autonomous region of the North Atlantic (RAAN) is becoming increasingly difficult under the government of Dr. Arnoldo Alemán, the current president of the republic. Alemán's administration has been unwilling to continue discussions regarding the management of natural resources and the rights of Indigenous communities in the coastal region of Nicaragua.

It was the previous administration of Doña Violeta Chamorro that granted a land concession to lumber dealers which affected the Sumo's territory. In March of 1996 the government of Doña Violeta Chamorro promised a concession to the timber company SOLCARSA, a subsidiary of the Korean company Kum Kyung, which granted the company a 30-year contract to explore and exploit the 63,000 hectares of tropical rain forest in the territory of the Sumo community of Awastingni. This concession was made without consulting the Sumo community. For the Sumos, this concession signifies a grave threat to the security and survival of the 364 families who live in this region and have traditionally fished, hunted, cultivated and buried their dead on these lands.

International pressure from financial institutions impelled the government of Violeta Chamorro to start privatizing state industries and to undertake development projects on a grand scale in order to attract foreign investment. The government alleged that, according to the Civil Code, the lands were not titled to private individuals but belonged to the government and could therefore be given in concessions. With this justification the government handed over great tracts of national land to transnational corporations like SOLCARSA. This policy contra-

dicts the Law of Autonomy of the Atlantic Coast as well as the measures concerning traditional lands which were won in 1985.

In September 1996, the Sumos presented a petition to the court of appeals in Managua against the Ministry of Natural Resources (MARENA) in an attempt to halt the concession. When their appeal was rejected, the community took their case to the Supreme Court. It in turn discarded their case, claiming that the appeal was submitted 30 days after the signing of the concession — in other words, they acted too late.

The Sumos considers these actions by the government to be in violation of international norms, the Constitution of the republic and the statute of the Autonomous government of the Atlantic Coast region. They have filed a petition of protest before the Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Organization of American States (OAS). These organizations accused the Nicaraguan government of not complying with its obligation to guarantee the demarcation of the communal lands of Awastingni and of the other Indigenous communities of the Atlantic Coast. Particularly frustrating is the fact that the national government continues to make consequential decisions regarding the national resources of the Atlantic Coast region in complete disregard of the

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statutes of the Autonomous Government of the Atlantic Coast, which has been awaiting ratification in the national congress since 1990.

As a result of the meetings with the IACHR and the OAS, delegates from the Nicaraguan government and representatives from the Sumo and Miskitu communities formed a task force under the Doña Violeta administration to further study the issue. However, under the new administration of Dr. Arnoldo Alemán, new conflicts are surfacing. Delegates of the new government are accusing Sumo leaders of being separatists. It is evident that the new government has little desire to continue with the task force discussions.

Meanwhile the Sumos continue to suffer from the repercussions of the mining exploitation project that operated on their lands from 1930 through the 1980s. They bitterly recount their personal experiences of the destruction of their environment, their rainforests and their entire way of life. They are demanding that this time their rights as an autonomous community be respected. For many years the rivers in their territory have been severely contaminated. The consequences of this contamination are evident: high infant mortality rates, chronic diarrhea, open sores on their skin and a host of other illnesses and infections. The Sumos demand respect for their community and improvements in their roads, their schools, their public health facilities and the care of their fragile forests. One of their highest priorities is ensuring the reforestation of their land.

For the Sumos, the only alternative for the survival of their communities is the demarcation of their communal lands. In this way they can legally keep out forces like the Korean company Kum Kyung which continue to seek access to their lands and resources. 🌿