



Indian People Criticize Earth Summit

(Panama, Ecuador) Indigenous Peoples do not expect a significant reduction in the rate of destruction of the environment after the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) to be held in Rio de Janeiro in June, and demand that their voices be heard at that conference.

For the Confederation of Indigenous People of Ecuador (CONAIE), the nature of the pre-UNCED negotiations held so far seem to point to the meeting being "great theater, with few concrete results".

Oswaldo de Leon Kantule, a youth leader of the Kuna People of Panama, said that he is opposed to the conference. He charges that it only provides a forum for governmental and non-governmental organizations and leaves out the native populations who are "the true defenders of Mother Earth."

De Leon insisted that the UN summit officially recognize Indian groups as the true environmental protectors and give them a forum from which to voice their demands after five centuries of exploitation, death and extermination.

Indigenous groups say official documents to be signed at the Rio meeting would hardly stop the current rate of environmental destruction in the region. "It will be a grand spectacle where each government will want to appear the

most progressive and Indian-friendly," said CONAIE president Luis Macas.

He criticized governments and NGOs for giving little importance to the "human aspects of conservation" during preparatory discussions for the Earth Summit. "We have seen governments and environmentalists from both North and South get deeply involved in discussions on biodiversity and technology, but without speaking about us (Indians), who have conserved the Earth for millennia," Macas said.

Delegates from the Ecuador ethnic conference had attended the Pre-UNCED negotiations which began in Kenya in August 1990 and ended last March in New York. For Macas, those who took part in the discussions "forgot the Indian tribes, who for centuries have lived in the forests and the high plateau of America."

He said Indigenous groups throughout the world would present to the Rio summit a report showing how the Indians view the universe and demanding that all economic activity in areas inhabited by Indians be administered by the Indigenous groups themselves.

Powerful countries must increase their economic aid, but at the same time, change their paternalistic and imperialistic outlook on the south," said Macas. He blamed the market society and the capitalist model for 75 percent of environmental deterioration in the world.

Vianor Perez, Kuna activist, described as "contradictory", the fact that Latin American governments wholeheartedly back the conference and at the same time, approve of the cutting down of the Amazonian forest. Every year, close to 200,000 acres of forest reserves are destroyed, territory which for centuries has provided food and shelter to the Indian population.

"A fundamental issue that the conference must discuss is the Indians' right to use their own land," said Kuna leader de Leon. "If some kind of agreement is not reached, the Indigenous people of Latin America will only be left with the air they breathe and the little land that surrounds them now."

"We indigenous people of Brazil don't expect much from that conference," said Ailton Krenack, the Coordinator of the Union of Indian nations in Brazil. "Because the governments who will participate have made the decision a long time ago about their environmental police. It is really just a show."

Source: *Inter Press Service and SAIC*

