

# MESO AMERICA



*The Kuna have a unique level of autonomy due to a long history of resistance.*

## A Message from the Kunas United for Mother Earth

(Panama) My name is Atencio Lopez Martinez, and I belong to the Kuna nation of the Kuna Yala region of Panama. I am here in North America to find out more about the work of our northern brothers and sisters and to investigate ways we might be able to coordinate our actions. I would like to share with you an account of what is happening to our people in Panama, in particular the Kuna people.

There are approximately 40,000 Kuna living on the islands in the Kuna Yala Region, in the northeast of Panama on the Colombian border. The region of Kuna Yala comprises more than 360 islands, of which 52 are inhabited. There is a very small percentage of Kuna who reside in the jungle outside of the jurisdiction of Kuna Yala, in the province of Panama. They also are struggling to have their territory (known as the Kuna Region of Madungandi) demarcated. Those of us who live on the islands or in the coastal areas of the Caribbean have a certain autonomy with respect to other indigenous groups and state policy.

We obtained a level of autonomy, which is unique among indigenous peoples, by fighting against the police and the colonial army of Panama in 1925. Many of our grandfathers lost their lives to the white invaders, who wanted to keep the Kuna people as their slaves. Among others, Nele Kantule and Coman led this uprising. They proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Tule, which was never actually formed, but we obtained the autonomy we continue to exercise today, albeit with many problems. We do not assess national taxes amongst our own peoples, and what we assess from non-Kuna people goes toward the development of our communities. With respect to our internal governance, we strongly enforce respect for traditions and customs within our communities. In the political realm, we have the General Kuna Congress, which



unites all Kuna people and organizations. Every six months the problems of our people are reviewed in this congress. During the rest of the year our communities and organizations work independently. Distinct political and even ideological positions are respected. What unites us is the defense of our region, our Mother Earth, and our culture.

The Kuna Region of Madungandi is being threatened by the invasion of non-indigenous colonists. Those who live in the jungle region are on mountainous lands which are less productive, the result of a forced relocation in 1974 and 1975 by the former government of General Omar Torrijos. The government decided to build a hydroelectric dam in the region in order to supply electricity to the republic. Ironically, today, our brothers still do not have electricity. They do not enjoy any of the benefits of this so-called "technological development."

They live in the province of Panama, under the direct administration of the authorities of that province. Their situation worsened in 1974 and 1975 when the government of Omar Torrijos flooded their territories and turned them into an artificial lake. Now the lake generates approximately 45% of the country's electricity. The cultivated lands of the Kuna were flooded, the people were displaced to inhospitable and less productive areas, and they received little compensation for their losses. In contrast, the colonists or invaders were relocated to better parts and given compensation for the loss of land and cultivated areas. Since the origins of this problem nearly 20 years ago, the stealing of lands from the Kuna has continued. Today, it is led by wealthy landowners and cattle ranchers who manipulate disputes between poor people and our brothers in order to eventually take over the land themselves. These invasions have increased since the US invasion of Panama, as a result of the confusion and lack of applied justice.

On the 10th of July, 1991, the Kuna of Madungandi began a series of peaceful protests, an uprising. The Panamanian authorities immediately stated that the "Kuna indigenous people, using heavy weapons, have risen up... to destabilize the present government." This became the pretext for the governor of the province to request the police intervention in order to repress the Kuna. Fortunately, their false claims were disregarded and confronted with courage by our brothers, with the support of the Kuna Yala.

The Kuna who live on the islands engage in subsistence production. The men generally work in fishing the seas and agricultural production, in particular the production of coconut, which is our main source of cash income. We sell coconuts to Colombian ships, and many of us exchange it for food products. The Panamanian government has done little or nothing to purchase coconut from us and to look for a solution to the deep economic crisis affecting our regions. Amongst our people, we continue to barter for food products, which contributes slightly toward alleviating the crisis. The women, in turn, dedicate themselves primarily to the home and to the care of children.

*(See Atencio, p. 45)*



## The Kuna Speak about 500 Years of Resistance

(Panama) Our organization, along with other indigenous organizations in Panama have coordinated the 500 years campaign in a united way. We see 1992 as a time to commemorate not only 500 years of resistance, but also to reinforce ties of unity amongst ourselves. This will enable us to better confront our enemies who try to divide us and deny our existence. It is for this reason that we recognize the struggle of other poor and marginalized sectors of our country. Like us, they fight for their survival and for respect of their rights. However, we do not tolerate those non-indigenous organizations that want to capitalize on the 500 years campaign for political purposes. They want to use indigenous peoples without understanding and recognizing the nature of our struggles.

We do not deny the struggle of other sectors of Abya Yala (continent, in the Kuna language). On the contrary, our continent will be free only when all sectors... are free. However, there are attempts to undermine the unity among indigenous peoples by using us when we are in the limelight, and simultaneously giving priority to other struggles.

I believe that 1992 should not be seen as the end of the indigenous struggle. Instead, we must realize that our struggle will continue beyond 1992, until there is recognition of all of our rights of self-determination for our territories. This must be understood by those popular groups who support us. They should not see in the struggle of indigenous people, the opportunity to achieve their own aspirations. We are in solidarity with them, and we thank them for their solidarity. And we recognize that there are divisions amongst indigenous peoples, but in spite of all of these, 1992 should be a year for monumental unity, in order to challenge our enemies. Our Mother Earth is being beaten, and her children should be united to defend her.

In Panama we have a 500 Years National Committee composed of indigenous and non-indigenous groups. The indigenous peoples include the Kuna, Guaymie, and Embera. We want the Committee to be composed not solely of people from the capital and big cities, but rather people from the communities of our regions. We are proposing a National Gathering to deal with many issues, including that of greater unity in order to defend our rights and demands to the national government.

I would like to call on all of our brothers and sisters of the continent to keep our fists high - together we will advance along a path of unity and liberation of our peoples.



## Davi (continued from p. 21)

There are many people who are powerful. There are powerful gold miners... and authorities too, like Romero Juca, former president of FUNAI. He is responsible for letting the gold miners invade our territory and... for lots of killings of Yanomami... Something must be done to solve our problem because Romero Juca will not solve it. He does not like us...

Do the international authorities and people from the United States think it is true what they always say that the demarcation of Yanomami land is a matter of money, that they do not have money to do it?...

I am very worried about people abroad who... are giving money to Brazil... but not to help the Indians. This money that comes from abroad is helping the Brazilian government to oppress Indians. I am very worried about that.

Non-Indians are like ants. I know that non-Indians like our resources. They say that we have gold, we have lumber, and they say that they need that to help the people who live in the city. Well, we do not want them, and we do not want them here.

What we want is respect for our rights. We want them to leave us alone. We need help with regard to the health situation. In the beginning we did not need any help. We did not need any doctors, any medical doctors, any nurses or any medicine. But now we need doctors and nurses to help the Yanomami who are sick. We also need medicines because we used to cure ourselves only with 'shabori' [shamanism]... But that is not enough anymore. And we need medical doctors and medicines and help from non-Indian people.

We are worried because the non-Indians are not very much worried about us. They think that we are a different race. Therefore, they want to isolate us. They think we are bothering their work. We are preventing them from working here, so they would rather have us isolated. They do not worry very much about what is going on with us.

## Atencio (continued from p. 26)

They are a strong force in the economic survival of our communities. This is because of their involvement in the production of "molas," which is the art of the Kuna. Because the "molas" are being sold at national levels and exported to the US and Europe, they are achieving economic success at international levels. In many respects, the women have a greater capacity to organize themselves in cooperatives and to contribute to the economic survival of the Kuna family than the men do. This is why, when we speak of the Kuna economy, we speak of men and women as equals.

We have strongly safeguarded our spirituality and traditions. For example, we hold the *General Congress of Kuna Culture*, which unites the spiritual guides of all of our communities. They are highly respected by all Kuna people. They promote teaching and learning amongst the youth so that our rich traditions are not lost.

We, of Kuna Yala, are confronting serious problems along the Colombian border, where gold prospectors are invading our lands. We are also indirect victims of the confrontations which take place in Colombia between the guerrillas and the army. Violating all laws, both sides invade our region while the Panamanian authorities do nothing to stop them. The same thing occurs with the Yanqui (United States) army which often crosses our territory to go to the Panamanian border with the excuse of filling the vacuum created by the dissolution of the Panamanian army in 1989, following the invasion.



## Ampan (continued from p. 11)

domination, everybody is afraid that we will take a racist stand and that this will lead to a racial confrontation. For this reason, there has not been enough dialogue amongst the poor class. In meetings with laborers, peasants and intellectuals, it is important for us to talk so that we feel equal. We must, if we are from the same class, talk so that we can find a solution...

Plurinationality will only be possible with the total transformation of society. This is possible if, as in Switzerland, there are well-defined and recognized sectors. We understand that the problem is not exclusively indigenous. It is a problem which concerns all of us. In order to form such a state we must think carefully what it would be like. How would it be governed at the political, economic, social and cultural levels? If we find that the workers are on one side, the indigenous on another and other sectors on other sides, then it will not be possible... We must continually reconsider our struggle and include long-term goals in our strategy. We must work together and make compromises. We must coordinate our endeavors in this way or we will not succeed, even if we are united.