Indigenous Women in Search of Recognition

Guest Author
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With the theme "Feeling, thinking, and creating the future," the IV Intercontinental Encounter of Indigenous Women brought together some 400 indigenous women from all over North and South America in Lima, Peru, from April 4-7. The participants discussed issues such as globalization, the environment and natural resources, intellectual property and biodiversity, communication and information technologies, gender and poverty, reproductive health, human rights, intercultural education, economics, empowerment, political participation, and the indigenous movement.

Feeling, thinking and creating the future

The event began with a ritual ceremony in the sanctuary of Pachacamac a pre-Incan archeological complex located south of Lima in which offerings of corn, quinua, flowers, coca leaves, and chichi, a fermented corn drink, were made and prayers were recited affirming the common purpose of all the representatives of the native peoples gathered there. Intense debate took place in each of the panels.

Women denounced "the invasion and reduction of their territories, environmental abuses, displacement, loss of identity, violence and poverty" resulting from globalization, which they branded="evil" for indigenous people and especially for them. Participants strongly criticized Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on indigenous peoples, saying that, although this instrument "recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to preserve their customs, in practice it only takes into account reports by governments.

Mechanisms for a direct relation with indigenous groups are lacking, because only unions are recognized by this organism." They also complained of being victims of systematic human rights violations and demanded that governments and international organizations meet their commitments in support of these rights.

Leonor Zabalata, of the Arhuac indigenous people of Colombia, denounced the extraction of natural resources from their territories. "Big capital is interested in our [natural] wealth," Zabalata said. "They want our territories, and the best way [to get them] is by displacement, murder. We are opposed to murder and to forced recruitment of our brothers and sisters by the army and by armed groups," she added.

The event concluded with a declaration in which the indigenous women ratified their pledge to achieve unity through diversity, to rescue the values and knowledge of their people, to recover teachings and their culture, language, and ways of conceiving life. "We are all called on to advance, to take one more step with strength and fortitude, united in diversity like our own peoples, to
stand up and demonstrate our capacity and demand our rights before states, working arduously for ourselves and for our peoples, reviving and exercising the teachings of our mothers and our grandmothers."

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