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OAS Investigates Alleged Enslavement of Guarani Indians in Eastern Bolivia

by LADB Staff
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The Bolivian government sought from February through April to reform land holdings in the Gran Chaco area of the eastern department of Santa Cruz, alleging that thousands of Guarani Indians were being forced to labor in conditions of slavery. The charges led to an investigation by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), a human rights body within the Organization of American States (OAS).

The investigation took place in the area of Bolivia where anti-government leaders have been fighting to gain autonomous powers from the federal government and stop projects like agrarian land reform, which the administration of President Evo Morales claims would liberate the "captive peoples."

'A state of bondage analogous to slavery'
In a June press release, the IACHR announced that it would "conduct a visit to Bolivia from June 9-13, to gather information on captive communities of the indigenous Guarani people living in a state of bondage analogous to slavery," in Bolivia's Gran Chaco region.

Maria Isabel Rivero, spokesperson for the group, announced the trip's progress on June 11, saying IACHR first vice president Luz Patricia Mejia, as envoy for Bolivia, would lead the delegation and would travel along with Victor Ambramovich, an envoy for indigenous peoples' rights, and other personnel from the IACHR executive secretariat.

Rivero said, "We are working in Sucre," the capital of Chuquisaca department, where there have been reports of violence against indigenous groups, "and in the coming hours we will go to Camiri," in the Chaco region of Santa Cruz close to the border with Chuquisaca. She said the group would present its report in the capital of La Paz on June 12.

"Given the extreme gravity of the situation experienced by these communities, the IACHR has followed this issue through visits, reports, and public hearings," said the group. They said a June 2007 report titled Access to Justice and Social Inclusion: The Road toward Strengthening Democracy in Bolivia based on a November 2006 visit contained observations and recommendations by the commission on the situation faced by the captive communities.

The IACHR also held hearings on March 10 on the status of captive peoples. Since 2006 the government of President Morales has promised to address the situation of the Guarani people living in forced-labor conditions. Morales, a coca-growers union leader of Aymara descent, is the nation's first indigenous president and strongly supports pro-indigenous policies. At the March 10 hearing, a
Guarani leader said some 800 families lived in slavery-like conditions. Justo Molina, president of the Consejo de Capitanes Guaraníes de Chuquisaca, said, "They are in captivity, they live like slaves."

The exact terminology for their condition was the source of some controversy, with vice minister of land Alejandro Almaraz describing it as a state of "servitude," which he claimed was a form of exploitation present throughout Bolivian history but which the Morales government was in the process of eliminating.

The Guarani communities in question work more than eight hours a day, with all members of the family including children laboring. But they do not receive pay, Almaraz said to reporters after meeting with the IACHR. "In exchange for their work they receive part of an irregular salary, every three or four months, as well as in-kind items, food and soap," said Almaraz.

"The owner eventually allows them to plant a small piece of land for their subsistence that never ceases to belong to the owner." Molina said that those who oppose this situation including himself were subject to "grave threats" including death threats. Since 2005 the Bolivian state has recognized the existence of "captive communities," which Almaraz says the government has set a goal to eliminate before 2011, when Morales' term will end.

Molina said the Guaranis do not have the right to leave the ranches where they live: they live there, they sleep in sheds, they visit neither the cities nor their families. "The owners always say that the Guarani are only good for work, they are not apt for any other thing, not for studying, not for social life, so for what purpose are they going to leave?" said Molina.

**Land reform key to liberation**

Almaraz said that the 1953 land reform ended servitude for the Andean peoples of Quechua and Aymara ethnicity, the country's two principal indigenous groups. But it has been difficult to end it in the Chaco where the Guarani, the country's third-largest minority group, reside.

"We accept what the petitioners have said in the hearing as true," said the vice minister, "but the government is taking intense actions, in agreement with the Guarani people, for the territorial reconstitution of the Guarani nation."

Almaraz said the government believes that the endowment of lands and development measures are "the definitive and sustainable solution to the problem." The investigations into claims of slavery or servitude, along with government calls for land reform for the Guarani, take place against an extremely politicized backdrop.

The political leaders of Santa Cruz are leading the regional backlash against the Morales government's indigenist proposals. "Civic groups" in Santa Cruz are leading the push for greater autonomy and a stop to the government's socialist reforms.

On May 4, Santa Cruz conducted a referendum calling for autonomy from the federal government (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16). The vote passed overwhelmingly, although the federal government
did not recognize the vote as legal, and there was relatively high abstention. The autonomy rules criticized as separatist actions by Morales allies would give power to regional governors in the country's wealthier, whiter eastern departments. The autonomy movement generally represents regional oligarchs, such as large-scale landholders, and natural-gas and agricultural businesspeople. Conventional analyses held that the government's land reform process would likely be put on hold after the autonomy referendum passed by a more than 8-to-1 margin in May. As the governors of Bolivia's east continue their political battle with La Paz, the thousands of Guarani people working for virtually nothing may have to wait even longer for improved economic conditions.

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