

510 Years of Discrimination Against Indians

by Gustavo González

Indigenous peoples in the Americas continue to suffer heavy discrimination and human rights abuses, a decade after the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the first European conquistadors to the continent, Amnesty International reported.

On the eve of what is known as Columbus Day, Día de la Raza or Native American Day on 12 October, the London-based rights group issued a report on the continued undermining of the identity of indigenous people, and violations of their rights in a number of countries, especially Guatemala and Mexico.

But abuses against indigenous communities and activists working in defence of their rights also continue to occur in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua, the report states.

The lack of progress has been discouraging, in light of the demands set

forth by indigenous people in October 1992, 500 years after Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas, and the commitments assumed at the time by governments and the international community.

The frustration that has built up over the past decade will give rise to protest demonstrations in a

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number of Latin American cities, including Santiago, the capital of Chile, where a "Mapuche March" has been convened by local indigenous and human rights groups.

The basic rights of indigenous communities, including the right to land and to cultural identity—in the use of language, education and the administration of justice—are systematically violated in a number of countries, states the Amnesty International report.

From Canada to the southernmost tip of Chile and Argentina, Indians are often treated like "second-class citizens" and are among the poorest, most marginalised communities, it adds.

That reality stands in stark contrast to the fact that more than half the countries on the continent recognise the multicultural character of the State and guarantee indigenous rights in their constitutions and legislation, according to the report.

The rights group also underlines that racism and discrimination entrenched in most societies make indigenous people more vulnerable to human rights violations including torture and ill treatment, disappearances and murder.

Governments across the Americas lack the political commitment to enforce the rights of native communities, as demonstrated by the way authorities have

been "dragging their feet" with respect to the adoption of the American Declaration on Indigenous People, it maintains.

The report urges governments to comply with the resolution on the issue adopted this year by the Organisation of American States (OAS) general assembly, and to "move ahead on it."

One illustration of government apathy towards the question of indigenous rights is the failure of Guatemalan authorities to bring to justice those responsible for the genocide against indigenous communities committed in the context of that country's bloody civil war, which broke out after the constitutional government of Jacobo Arbenz was toppled in 1954.

During the country's 36-year armed conflict, around 200,000 civilians—mainly indigenous men, women and children—were killed or "disappeared" in what was described as "genocide" by the Historical Clarification Commission.

Armed conflict has also led to mass killings of indigenous people by army troops, right-wing paramilitaries or leftist guerrillas in Colombia and Mexico, notes Amnesty International.

In Guatemala, activists working in defence of the rights of indigenous peoples have received death threats, and have been tortured and even killed, like Manuel

García de la Cruz, who was tortured and murdered in September 2002. This was apparently in reprisal for his human rights and development work with an indigenous rights organisation.

"In a number of countries, including Guatemala and Mexico, non-Spanish speaking indigenous people are often questioned by police and have their statements taken without the assistance of an interpreter. In Guatemala, indigenous people have stood trial in capital cases in Spanish, which they do not speak," says the report.

"On a recent occasion in Chile, two members of the Mapuche community were found guilty of 'disrespect' and 'disorderly behaviour' for shouting slogans in Mapundung and playing traditional instruments at a court case," it adds.

Human rights advocates working with indigenous communities have also become the targets of attacks in Bolivia and Nicaragua, in cases documented by the rights watchdog.

In addition, the rights of indigenous people have been violated in Argentina, Canada and Honduras, in the form of murder, torture, mistreatment and the excessive use of force, states the report.

Rights abuses linked with land and environmental disputes also give testimony to the lack of progress made in favour of indigenous rights since the com-

memoration of the 500-year anniversary.

"Across the region, large-scale projects for the construction of infrastructure or the extraction of natural resources on indigenous lands threaten the communities' livelihood and survival, and are being planned and carried out without real and transparent consultation," says Amnesty.

In Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Guatemala and Nicaragua, indigenous claims to ancestral territory have been met with "violent opposition from landowners and companies exploiting natural resources, often supported by the authorities."

The Plan Puebla-Panama, which involves Mexico and Central America, is one of the infrastructure projects questioned by the report for its potential negative effects on indigenous communities.

Similar conflicts can be seen in Brazil, Colombia and Nicaragua, says the rights group.

In Brazil, for instance, Xavante indigenous leader Hiparidi Top'Tiro was forced off his land in the west-central state of Mato Grosso by death threats he received due to his work in defence of the environment and his opposition to the deforestation of communally owned indigenous land.

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