Bolivia - Lowland indigenous peoples

Profile

Indigenous peoples in lowland Bolivia include the Chiquitano, Ese-Eja, Guaraní, Moxeño and Ayoreo. They are much more marginalized than the country's highland indigenous peoples; numbering some 0.5 million they make up only a minority of the local population. They are also more dispersed and have different cultural attributes and practices.

Historical context

Despite such organizational disadvantages, it was the lowland indigenous peoples of Bolivia who initiated the most dramatic example of indigenous mobilization and protest in the 1990s, with the March for Territory and Dignity (1990). The march started in September in Trinidad, in the Amazon rainforest, and marchers reached La Paz 35 days later. Their main demand was recognition of lowland indigenous peoples' territorial rights and protection from the incursions of loggers and other colonists. The relationship between highland and lowland groups at the time was ambivalent – there was very little shared sense of identity or purpose and the regional movements were very distinct – but highland Aymara and Quechua joined the march along the way. As a result of the mass protest, the government recognized 1.5 million hectares of land as indigenous territory. Despite being the catalyst for political mobilization and a great national debate about indigenous rights, lowland indigenous groups have since lost the political initiative.

Current issues

Lowland indigenous peoples in Bolivia have found themselves largely marginalized from national political processes since the mass protests of the early to mid-1990s, although they are still involved in (or protected by) a number of cultural and political organizations. Violent attacks by colonists and logging interests continue to be a major problem. In December 2006
Chiquitano indigenous leaders and their offices were attacked in the Department of Santa Cruz. The Comité Civico (Civic Committee) of Santa Cruz, a racist group with much power in the region, has been accused of carrying out the attacks.

Following the 2005 elections the national organization of the Guaraní nation, (APG), had hoped a Morales administration would advance the territorial reconstitution of Guaraní ancestral lands.

In 2006 the government pushed through laws (N°3501 and N°3545) to improve or ‘clean-up’ land titling (saneamiento) for the benefit of peasants and indigenous people. However at the end of 2008 the Guaraní were one of the groups that had benefited the least from these efforts.

While Guaraní communities have received far more land under MAS administrations than during the five previous national presidents, the APG feels the government should do more.

The Guarani populate Bolivia's arid Chaco region that includes parts of the Departments of Santa Cruz, Chuquisaca, and Tarija which are all considered hotbeds of anti-government sentiment. So far only between five and ten per cent of the communal land demanded by Guaraní communities has been granted. Other lowland indigenous groups have received much higher percentages.

Among other aims, the new land titling laws attempted to tighten restrictions on what constitutes the productive use of land. It gave Bolivia’s National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA) the authority to nullify property rights of landowners found using systems of servitude, captivity, forced labor, or debt peonage. Bolivian and international human rights organizations have published reports estimating that at least 600 Guaraní families live in conditions of semi-slavery on estates in the departments of Santa Cruz, Chuquisaca and Tarija. These landless families live in virtual captive communities on employers’ estates. Guarani informants testify to working 12 hour days for far below the legal minimum wage. Some workers receive just food and second-hand clothes and no cash payment at all.

Debt slavery is common and sometimes trans-generational. Child labor and corporal punishment reportedly are also widespread.

During 2008, INRA tried to formally create an indigenous Guaraní Communal Territory of Origin (CTO) in the region of Alto Parapetí, in Cordillera province on lands claimed by Guarani since 1996. This initiative includes the liberation of about ten "captive" Guaraní communities.

The government insists that the long overdue land reform represents an opportunity by which various Guaraní communities can be freed from semi-slavery and assured a sustainable rural livelihood. In stark contrast the landowners and their supporters maintained that the issue of slavery is a government-invented diversion. Placing it in a wider political context that steadfastly favours the status quo, the dissidents argue that the land reform is part of much larger government strategy aimed at controlling the region's hydrocarbon resources and dissolving the local municipalities.
Conflicts in Alto Parapetí between INRA and large landowners escalated at the end of February 2008 when in an effort to halt the land titling process, a major landowner in Santa Cruz, and other ranchers held Bolivia's Vice-minister of Land, hostage at gunpoint for several hours when government officials tried to enter the region.

Later a group of 50 to 100 landowners, cattle ranchers, and their supporters forced INRA officials out of their office and sacked the premises. In mid April they also orchestrated a nine-day blockade of major highways virtually sealing off Alto Parapetí until the Vice-minister of Land, left the region.

The most vocal support for the dissidents in Alto Parapetí came from agricultural and cattle producers' associations, local Cordillera politicians and very prominent political figures in nearby Santa Cruz. Additionally several members of the proto-fascist Unión Juvenil Crucenista (Cruceña Youth Union) travelled to the area to support the blockades.

Independent foreign observers have claimed that to give the impression that some eastern areas are in deep political turmoil, media personnel working for channels controlled by resident power groups orchestrate the behaviour of local youth on-camera to convey the impression of genuine popular mobilisation. Observers explained that a group of no more than 20 persons – move around sequentially 'occupying' various institutions. At each location a different spokesperson is sent forward to talk to the media in order to magnify the 'dramatic' elements and to broadcast a false impression. They also noted the absence of any other demonstrations apart from those staged by the prefect's office.

Despite the threats, at the end of 2008 INRA reiterated its commitment to complete the titling as required by the law, and the Grand Captain of the Guaraní community in Alto Parapetí publicly condemned the ranchers for trying to impede the titling process.