

## Nukak and Tucano

### Profile

One of Colombia's last nomadic peoples, the few hundred remaining people of the Nukak branch of the Maku people, spend several months of each year working for another indigenous group, Tukano.

Tukano are among the most politically active of lowland groups, although not all are members of the Regional Council of Vaupés Indians (CRIVA), a federation founded in 1973 with members from some 35 different ethnic groups. Many Tukano are hostile to CRIVA, considering it an organization created by whites, and one which has had little influence. The Tukano language was formerly known as Betoya, today Middle Tukano is called Kubeo; while Western Tukano is known as Korebaju, Makaguaje, Siona and Tama; and Eastern Tukano is known as Bará, Baraasana, Desano, Karapana, Makuna, Piratapuyo, Pisamira, Siriano, Tanimuka, Tatuyo, Tukano, Tuyuka, Wananao, and Yuruti. The Tukano live in towns like Acaricuara, Montfort, and Piracuara on the Colombian and Brazilian border.

There are several programs to try to unite the Nukak with other indigenous groups in order to protect their culture and provide them with additional advocates for their rights and land. The Tukano is a large well known group in the Amazon region, and many Tukano in Brazil and Colombia are actively involved in arts and crafts production

### Historical context

Subjected to lethal attacks by colonists during the rubber boom, twenty Nukak were killed by colonists in 1987. Survivors of the attack who were taken to the New Tribes Mission station were subsequently returned to the forest with no medication against the diseases they carried with them. Between 1988 and 1991 Nukak were decimated by imported diseases such as influenza. Nukak are also caught up in the violence surrounding the Colombian drug traffic. They are attacked both by coca growers and by the military, whose pilots apparently mistake them for coca growers or left-wing guerrillas.

### Current issues

In a press release issued by UNHCR in April 2005, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, referred to the real and impending danger of the extinction of the small indigenous communities of the Amazon region (UNHCR, April 2005).

The Nukak -Maku, Guyabero, Sikvani, and Tucano peoples continue to be the victims of deep discrimination and marginalisation characterised by physical, social, cultural, economic, and political processes and trends which they hold responsible for the genocide of their populations. Examples of such trends, according to them, include the detrimental impacts of the Free Trade Agreement (FTTA or TLC), the war on terror, issues relating to intellectual property which threaten to deny them access to the

biological diversity and natural resources found within their territories, and foreign diseases brought by outside colonists to which their communities have no immunity (ONIC, May 2006, CRIDEC, October 2006).

In 1985 there were approximately 1,200 people belonging to these indigenous groups and in 20 years their numbers have dwindled to less than 500 people. There are now currently only 255 surviving Nukak-Maku in Colombia (ONIC, 2006). Mass displacement caused by the arbitrary occupation of their ancestral lands by illegal armed groups, drug trafficking, indiscriminate aerial fumigations funded by Plan Colombia, state and private capital-led development and mega-projects, together with violence and murders against their leaders and communities, committed mainly by the same illegal armed actors, are additional driving factors behind their pending disappearance (ONIC, May 2006). This is especially since these activities have destroyed the local economy which was focused mainly on fishing, hunting and bartering.

As a gesture of solidarity with the Nukak-Maku peoples, in October 2006 the indigenous Embera Chami of the department of Caldas issued a communiqué in which they blamed the Colombian government for being responsible for the suicide of a Nukak-Maku leader. The leader of a group of 160 indigenous people could no longer bear to see the suffering of his people, and was unable to obtain the necessary resources to organise the return to their ancestral territories (CRIDEC, October 2006).

In April 2008 the UNHCR deemed it necessary to organize a humanitarian mission to provide emergency aid to Guyabero and Nukak Maku communities living along the Guaviare River in south-central Colombia.

Fourteen tons of food were provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) and delivered by boat to some 1,000 people in the riverside villages of Mocuare, Puerto Alvira and Barranco Colarado and the municipal centre of Mapiripan which were all facing an extremely difficult humanitarian situation including critical food shortages.

UN reports and humanitarian aid news sites including Reliefweb said, Most of the beneficiaries had been forced to flee their lands as a result of the armed conflict, further putting at risk their survival as unique ethnic group.

Their traditional area continues to be the disputed battleground of rival irregular armed groups with the Colombian armed forces also trying to regain control of the territory.

Hundreds of people have fled the area since the beginning of 2008 with some locations losing nearly 75 percent of an estimated 3,000-strong population. In the village of Barranco Colarado, only about 40 families (around 200 people) from two indigenous groups were left, virtually cut off from the rest of the world. Hardly any food can get through and what does is very expensive.