
Panama: Kuna People denounce a development model that has divested them of their natural resources

On 13, 14 and 15 April, coinciding with the celebration of the First Centenary of the Republic of Panama, the Kuna People feel that their ancestral rights have not yet been accepted nor contemplated by a major part of Panamanian society. They gathered and made the following statement:

"The Kuna Nation, represented by its highest leaders, the Saila Dummagan of the Kuna Regions of Madungandi, Wargandi, Kuna Yala and Dakarkunyala, comprising a total of 68 communities, gathered in the community of Ibedi, Madungandi region on 13, 14 and 15 April, wish to declare to the Kuna People and to national and international public opinion our happiness over this meeting of brothers and sisters and our determination to walk together in the construction of the Kuna Nation.

After centuries of colonial aggression, which has led to the separation and dispersion of our peoples along rivers and in forests, and after 100 years of the Republic which has politically widened this division with national and provincial frontiers, we, the Saila Dummagan of the different Kuna regions have met to share our problems and to initiate a process of linking and unity in the defence of our rights.

In Ibirdidiuar, we have become more aware that we have the same roots; that we are brothers and sisters from the same pot; that Nana Gabayi was swallowed by Olotinakilele and his people and we have decided to gather her bones scattered over a multitude of rivers and revive them.

We are sorry that our brothers and sisters from Arquia and Caiman Nuevo were unable to attend due to the situation in Colombia. After listening to each other, we denounce that we have been and continue to be, the victims of a development model based on ambition, the plundering of natural resources and contempt for peoples' lives, for peoples and their cultures. The people and the names of systems change, but the philosophy is the same, the philosophy which led the Spaniards to invade our lands, murder our grandparents, destroy our culture and civilization to appropriate gold and other riches, is the same philosophy that today moves the George Bush administration to raze Iraq and massacre the Iraqi people in order to appropriate the black gold. The same philosophy that is behind the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, the Puebla-Panama Plan and the Colombia Plan, continues to have its eyes on our resources for the satisfaction of powerful peoples' interests, where there is no room for the rights of the legitimate owners and the dispossessed.

Gathered in the Kuna Region of Madungandi, we see how nearly three decades after having flooded 35,000 hectares of their territory with the construction of the Ascanio Villalaz hydroelectric power plant, our brothers and sisters continue to wait for the promises made to be fulfilled and how, instead of enjoying the benefits of the dam, they have seen malaria and other diseases increase.

This same philosophy is the one that wants to reform the Mining code and win over our minds and our hearts to implement misery in our Regions and the rest of the country.

It hurts us and we reject the fact that the lives of our brothers and sisters from Paya, Pupur and Arquia continue to be threatened and submitted, in this twenty-first century, to murder and displacement.

The declaration by the presidents of Colombia and Central America in Panama causes us indignation and we condemn the fact that there was no mention of the massacre of 4 Kuna brothers by the Colombian para-military forces, and that they only mentioned the attack on the exclusive club "El Nogal" in Bogota.

We condemn the irresponsibility of Mrs. Mireya Moscoso's government in getting involved in the Colombian conflict, placing the lives of those of us who live on the frontier in greater danger.

In the midst of the celebration of the First Centenary of the Republic, we feel that a major part of Panamanian society does not understand nor accept our rights, existing before the 100 years of the Republic and the 500 years of conquest and colonization.

We demand recognition of the Dakarkunyala Region for our brothers and sisters from Paya and Pupur and compliance with the promises made by the President of the Republic following the January massacre and that are still at starting point.

The Regions recognized by law, such as Madungandi, Wargandi and Kuna Yala continue to go unprotected and threatened by the invasion of more settlers and corporations. The national authorities turn a deaf ear on our claims, they are reluctant to receive our Saila Dummagan and do absolutely nothing to enforce the law and evict the illegal invaders.

Educational programmes continue to ignore our culture, cosmo-vision, history, spirituality and religion.

ILO convention 169 continues un-ratified.

As leaders of the Kuna Regions, we express our will to continue struggling to strengthen and develop our people. A development based on the principles of our culture: respect for people, Mother Earth and dialogue and solidarity among peoples.

We live in different Regions, but we are a single people. For this reason, we affirm our right and obligation to join our hands in achieving our objectives.

Given in the Community of Ibedi, Madungandi Region, on this 14th day of April of the year 2003."

Sent by Equipo de Redacción EcoPortal.net , Ambiente y Sociedad, N° 129, 23 April 2003, e-mail: info@ecoportal.net , www.ecoportal.net