
Nicaragua: Indigenous peoples' rights and the Bosawas Reserve

The East of Nicaragua is known as the Atlantic Coast (Costa Atlántica), and is geographically divided in a Northern and a Southern region. This area is characterized by being mostly inhabited by indigenous peoples --mainly Miskitos-- and for being the richest area concerning natural resources. Some 500,000 people (8% of the national population) live in this area (42% of the Nicaraguan territory), representing six ethnic groups who obtain their livelihoods from agriculture and fishing.

In 1987 during the Sandinista government, for the first time in Latin American history, an Autonomy Law was passed recognising community rights to use and benefit from natural resources as well as their right to practice their traditional forms of land tenure and transfer. Even though this law constitutes a victory for the indigenous peoples' struggle, during the last years those rights have been ignored by the voracity of foreign and national investors in the overexploitation of forest and marine resources.

In October 1991 the Nicaraguan government declared a large extension of the Atlantic Coast's indigenous territory as a National Reserve of Natural Resources, which is now widely known as Bosawas. This is the most extensive reserve in Central America, and in January 1998 it was declared Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO. The Bosawas area is the home of 12 animal species under threat of extinction, and of 18 species already extinct in the Central American region. The core area of the Reserve is composed of 750,000 hectares of dense primary tropical rainforest.

The reserve was created with no prior consultation with the 34,000 indigenous inhabitants of the area --Miskitos and Mayagnas-- who are still demanding such consultation to the governmental authorities. They also suspect that the government declared the area as a Natural Reserve in order to take profit of its natural resources, and consider that this act is in violation of their rights to the land and its resources.

The indigenous communities' demand for the demarcation and legalization of their lands has strengthened even further, given that day after day they are confronted with the spontaneous colonization of their territories. Additionally, they consider that the creation of Parks or Reserves does not contribute to the protection of the forests, but result in actually ignoring their legitimate right to their lands.

These communities are therefore demanding the government of Nicaragua to support a process of self-demarcation of their territories. This year the government has presented a draft bill for the regulation of indigenous communities' land ownership in the Atlantic Coast. However, the indigenous leaders argue that the project was elaborated without indigenous peoples' participation. Communities inhabiting the Bosawas Reserve demand to be recognized in their own identity and not by any designation related to the reserve and in that manner to have their right to the use of the natural resources guaranteed. They also claim that in no case the government should be the protagonist in the legalization of their territories but that that role should be assigned to the communities themselves.

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