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## Argentina: The state of the indigenous peoples

### Indigenous peoples of the Gran Chaco

Despite the constitutional recognition of the indigenous peoples in Argentina and the formal protection of their rights to bilingual education, ownership of their ancestral lands and guaranteed participation in resource management and development, indigenous people in practice seldom participate in the management of their natural resources.

In November 2007 indigenous leaders of the Chaco went to a hearing at the Supreme Court in Buenos Aires to publicize their grievances. They complained that, despite constant appeals to the politicians, state resources for housing, health, education and water supplies often do not even reach them. In the last few months at least 23 Toba, Wichí and Piraga people died from malnutrition. The poorly-equipped hospitals in the Chaco province are cramped with indigenous people suffering from diseases usually caused by poverty such as tuberculosis.

For many years the Wichí in the Gran Chaco, which includes parts of Paraguay, Bolivia and northern Argentina, have demanded the restitution of the lands that have been split up and sold against their will to wood companies and soy-farmers. According to environmental legislation, it is required to have public hearings before any large lumbering can be started. In the case of the Wichí those hearings were announced only in local newspapers and the Boletín Oficial to which the Wichí have no access, thus the Wichí only knew about the planned tree felling when the bulldozers had already arrived. Apparently no efforts had been made to communicate with the indigenous peoples about the decision making process for projects affecting their livelihood. Argentina has thereby violated the provisions of the C169 INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL PEOPLES CONVENTION of the International Labour Organisation, which Argentina ratified in 2000.

The woods of the Wichí in the province of Salta located in the Chaco salteño are constantly being ravaged for the precious palo santo (rosewood). The woods have been confronted since March 2007 by wood buying agents coming to their communities to buy rosewood for the export to China. There is a group of the Wichí community whose livelihood consists of carving rosewood into birds or other animals and selling their traditional craft. They also produce and sell charcoal. For this they use almost exclusively dead wood. The wood carvers usually live a better life than other members of their community due to the fact that they are not required to leave their villages like their families who harvest sugar cane as day labourers or migrate to the cities in search for work. Normally, they are better fed, healthier and better dressed than those who have to pursue others ways of earning their living.

The Wichí used to be a peaceful community, but the illegal wood trade has changed all that. China's hunger for precious wood has caused some of the Wichí to fell trees illegally, which have not been replanted. Poverty is leading them to destroy their own livelihood, even though compared to the wood carvers they only earn a starvation wage to begin with. The illegal tree felling has become increasingly rapid and on such a large scale that the wood carvers among

the Wichí fear for their raw material and thus their way of living as well. As a consequence, fighting has arisen among the Wichí along with complaints, imprisonments and death threats.

There is a desperate need for more stringent control of the laws regulating the timber industry. The Wichí can only maintain their traditional economy of producing arts and crafts if all exports of rosewood will be put to an end, and starting by replanting felled trees. There is a great need for effective programs to support a self-sufficient economy, the health care system and the educational system of the indigenous community and help restore peace among the Wichí by giving them a better future prospect for their lives.

## **2. Reports about electoral fraud**

Reports by the local media (Canal 13) in the Chaco region-province of Formosa suggest cases of electoral fraud among the indigenous communities of Nainéck and Mission Tacaaglé of the Toba people in the October 2007 run-up elections. A week before the election, members of the communities were said to have received 10 Pesos each after handing over their ID-cards. On the day of the election the voters gathered in their communities and were then driven to the polling station. They were escorted to the ballot boxes where they were handed only the ballot papers of a certain candidate they were supposed to vote for and after having voted as they were supposed to they received their IDs back. According to the report, people who refused to agree with this procedure were threatened.

## **3. Mapuche in Patagonia**

Most of the Mapuche who live in Patagonia do not possess legal titles to the lands that their ancestors lived on long before the arrival of the Spaniards. The government agencies failed to find a mechanism to secure land titles for the indigenous inhabitants and to protect their land from being sold out to the world's rich. As a consequence it is difficult for them to lay claims on their own land which has become more and more interesting for wealthy magnates and celebrities who want to buy large estates in the pristine wilderness of this region. One of these is the Benetton family who owns the Benetton-Group in Italy. Owning nearly one million hectares of productive land in Patagonia, the Benettons are among the biggest land owners in Argentina and the biggest tax payers in the province of Chubut where their estates are located. Part of this land is, however, disputed by the Mapuche. In August 2002, the Mapuche Atilio Curiñanco and Rosa Sara Nahuelquir began to settle on 535 hectares of land with their four sons. They were convinced it was unoccupied Mapuche territory. They even asked a government land settlement agency (IAC) for permission which was granted to them – although only verbally and, thus, unofficially. They believed it to be outside of the Benettons compound, but the Benettons claimed it was their land and the family was evicted two months after they had begun to farm it. Even though the Mapuche family went – together with Argentine Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel – to the Italian capital of Rome to meet the chief of the company, Luciano Benetton, in person in December 2006, the conflict remains unsolved. In February 2007, a group of Mapuche reoccupied the land, which was evacuated in 2002.