

## **Indigenous Peoples Demand Action on Land Rights, Consent Issues**

(Georgetown, Guyana) Toshaos, Village leaders, regional leaders, district leaders, community leaders, and APA Executive members from the 8 regions meeting in Georgetown are demanding action from the Government of Guyana and the international community to advance the land rights of indigenous peoples and ensure that the principle of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) is respected.

“Our top most priority is to secure our traditional lands and territories”, stated Toshao Devroy Thomas, from Arau, Region 7. “Outstanding land claims must be resolved and our rights secured before mining, logging, or any other project that may have direct or indirect impacts on our traditional lands, territories and resources proceeds.”

Over the week-long meeting, leaders shared experiences with both public-sector and private development projects and proposals within their territories, and concluded that current practices in Guyana do not adequately respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

“The principle of free, prior and informed consent, which is enshrined in the National Constitution, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples endorsed by Guyana, and international treaties to which Guyana is a signatory demands more of the Government, of developers, and of international donors than is currently practiced, noted Amerindian lawyer, David James.

### **MINING AND REDD+ PROJECTS QUESTIONED**

The gathered leaders were particularly critical of mining and exploration practices, noting that neither the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission nor private developers appeared to be following the law requiring prior notice for concessions and permits, or prior consent for mining activities affecting titled Amerindian Lands under the Amerindian Act, 2006. They likewise expressed serious concerns over the failure of the responsible authorities to fully implement FPIC in accordance with the international obligations of Guyana, including in relation to untitled traditional lands.

“We heard many stories from each region, where large scale projects being undertaken by foreign companies are proceeding, but where relevant authorities such as the GGMC are failing to provide us with the necessary and timely information required to inform our communities and uphold our right to consent”, stated Amrita Thomas from Kamarang, Region 7. “This must change.”

“It is not acceptable that communities should be referred to government web sites to obtain the second draft of the LCDS document or other official information when we do not even have telephones”, said Roger Alfred from Paramakatoi village, Region 8.

The Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD)-Plus proposals by the Guyana Forestry Commission and World Bank were also questioned, with leaders stating that they did not understand what REDD-plus and carbon trading are about, nor how these proposals might affect the rights, interests and way of life of Amerindian peoples.

“The confused information and changing government positions on core issues calls into question whether information is being provided in good faith by either the Guyana Government or the international agencies that support this scheme,” stated Andrew da Silva from Arakumai Village, Region 1. “There can be no REDD without rights” he emphasised.

“Until such times as we have these community policies on FPIC in place, we call on the government and international agencies to refrain from any proposed implementation of extractive industry, infrastructure, LCDS, REDD-plus or other projects and programmes that may affect our lands, territories and resources”, da Silva continued.

The leaders expressed concern about public pronouncements reportedly made by the NTC Chair in international meetings discussing LCDS and REDD-plus policies, incorrectly suggesting that there are no serious unresolved Amerindian land issues in Guyana, other than those in relation to the Upper Mazaruni land case. Queries were also raised regarding recent unconfirmed reports of requests by the Minister of Amerindian Affairs and NTC chair encouraging Toshihos to write letters in support of the LCDS proposals, without following due FPIC procedures needed to uphold the rights of Amerindian peoples.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The gathering concluded with a statement of key recommendations, including:

- urgent measures to establish effective, fair and transparent mechanisms to clarify and secure Amerindian land and territorial rights in Guyana;
- demands that GGMC and other relevant national authorities take urgent measures to fully respect the law and Amerindian rights to Free, prior and informed Consent (FPIC) before permitting mining and exploration activities;
- the need for the EPA to update environmental and social impact assessment standards in Guyana to meet international standards and best practices;
- the requirement for the Government of Guyana and international donors to respect FPIC before adopting LCDS and REDD-plus policies, including provisions for ensuring that Amerindian communities have full information about how these policies might affect their lands and rights, and an ability to ‘opt-out’ if they determine that such policies do not meet their needs.

The leaders noted that many issues with consultation and implementation were the direct result of inadequate infrastructure in many regions, and called on the government and donors to take immediate steps to remedy this situation by investing in satellite telecommunication and internet services for Amerindian communities, among other measures.

**The full workshop statement is available on request by contacting:**

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