

Paraguayan Amerindians under genocidal pressure

Indigenous Peoples all over South America go through hard times. That is nothing new. Rather the continuity for the last half millennium. Yet, what is going on in Paraguay is beyond imagination of people who do not live there.

PLEASE GET INVOLVED. *You CAN make the difference. To halt or at least ease this pressure. All it needs is a few minutes of your time.*



Downtown Asunción: Dire Symbolism

I'm an autonomous worker in the field of tourism. I design so-called gentle and deep tours and guide visitors. All over South America, but mainly in Brazil (where I live), Paraguay (where I have lived before), Uruguay and the areas to both sides of the Bolivian-Argentinean boarder.

That, however, is just half of the truth. Because I am also an ethnologist turned activist. This other professional half of me, though, doesn't stand for any income. Quite the contrary. And this is the reason that I started working also with visitors some 20 years ago. To keep the main work going.

What I will do now might seem a little crazy. And maybe it is. Yet I have been carefully thinking and came to the conclusion that I have to act this way: *I ask you NOT to visit Paraguay.*

Of course you, interested in South American, human rights and/or Amerindian topics, will ask why. And I have the difficult task to try to reasonably explain why in as few sentences as possible. Since even without being a journalist I know that (almost) nobody in today's occidental ego-way of permanent rush hour life has any time (left to spare).

Indigenous Peoples all over South America go through hard times. That is nothing new. Rather the continuity for the last half millennium. At Indigenous communicators' conferences (held here in South America) I got to know indigenous people from all over the world. And know that the even in places like Canada or Russia Indigenous Peoples have to defend themselves (and Mother Earth) against an ongoing global lethal project. And I'm also aware that one should not make comparisons when it comes to Human Rights (abuses).

Yet, I dare to say that what is going on in Paraguay is beyond imagination of contemporary people who do not live in Paraguay or are not empirically acquainted with it.

Last March I had been guiding a client on a specially designed tour through Southern Brazil, Paraguay and a chunk of Bolivia and (logically) took the opportunity to (re)visit Native friends.

Paraguay has "two heterogeneous halves". The fertile (and smaller) East, and the barren West (the "Chaco").

The East is relatively densely populated. The Chaco is one of the least populated areas in the world. But when it comes to the (also ethnically and culturally very heterogeneous) Amerindian Peoples, both halves have much in common. Although Paraguay looks (to people afar, or to the visitor's eye) very much like a country with strong and lively Indigenous signs, reality behind that first impression is dire.

Yes, Paraguay was the first country to officially declare an offspring of Amerindian languages, the so-called "Guaraní", one of its languages (besides Spanish). And once you're out of the few big cities (like Asunción or Ciudad del Este) Guaraní indeed is spoken everywhere. And yes, whether you come into the country from Brazil or Argentina, the strikingly different phenotype you'll meet on the Paraguayan side is strongly reminiscent of Guaraní People. That is a lasting result of the Spanish intruders' preference of (light-skinned) Guaraní women. And the following centuries with European women virtually absent from the country.

But what about the real deal for Indigenous people in "modern" Paraguay?

In almost all towns of the East you will find makeshift slums inhabited by them. Without any kind of infrastructure and totally abandoned by all levels of government. No surprise thus that the one and only source of income=survival, apart from occasional sales of handicraft, is prostitution. Especially child

prostitution. Rampant and unhidden. Corrupt police (and believe me, there is NO corrupter police in the Americas then the Paraguayan!) earning their share.



Living conditions of Amerindians stranded in Paraguayan cities

“Naturally” in border towns like Ciudad del Este this “business” is a visitor attraction. Every Brazilian cab driver (from Foz do Iguaçu) will know where to drive a “man” to who is looking for such service. But let me repeat: Ciudad del Este is NOT an exception. You find the same thing going on in Encarnación, Asunción, wherever.



Urban intersections are places where Amerindian children often spend the day begging - In the less terrible case

And that is just the visible part. Because much if not most of the abusing and raping goes on behind walls. Walls of very fine houses that is. House maids in wealthy urban households do often come from the countryside (to escape bitter poverty) and Indigenous girls are sought for. Their inexperience with urban life (and hypocrisy) makes them easy victims. They receive much less payment (if any) and have to serve the “man” of the house and often his sons. As kind of a “training tool”. Very few talk about it. Yet, everybody knows it.

Now you might ask, why do Amerindian people, if the situation is that bad, leave their home in the first place.

Well many are without a home. Without territory. Or with a territory too small to render enough food for all. Much less in order to live in some accordance with their traditional life style.

Or their territory is constantly invaded and plundered. Not seldom by “official forces” like the army. Or by big land owner sponsored gangs. To fell and sell the last trees of noble wood. To catch slave labour. To plant weed which, due to its prohibition, stand for huge profits in neighbouring Brazil and Argentina.



Urban Amerindian children's bathroom

Or, and that is just the latest of the genocidal fronts against the aboriginal peoples, because Brazilian soya barons want them out of their monoculture-über-alles way.

How powerful the Brazilian planters have become within Paraguay you may imagine by the fact that 80% of the land of Alto Parana department (the most fertile stripe of Paraguay) is meanwhile in Brazilian farmers' possession. (And how Brazilian soya barons deal with Amerindians you may understand going to: <http://www.thenewscollective.org/display-related->

news.php?itemHeadline=Mato+Grosso+do+Sul%3A+Guarani+Man+Killed+In+Ambush+By+Gunmen)



Canindeyú department, near Curuguaty: The country is Paraguay - The land, though, is in Brazilian soya farmers' hands

Paraguay's judicial system is, at best, in kindergarten. Apart from being corrupt to the bone. Magistrates who want to do their job rightfully risk their life, when it comes to the concerns of the very powerful. That's all still a vivid legacy of the longest-running American dictatorship of the twentieth century led by general Stroessner (a Nazi admirer and employer of Dr. Mengele) and upheld by the "Colorado Party". The very same party that still is the strongest force in Paraguay and again holds the presidency today.

Or, in other words, anything goes. As long as you have the money and your opponents are have-nots. Thus Paraguay has been producing (since the Stroessner days), especially in the very fertile lands next to the Brazilian border, increasing numbers of landless (landrobbed) small farmers and Amerindians on the run. (For further information on this topic see:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/paraguay-justice-still-needed-all-curuguaty-deaths-year-2013-06-14>)

A brief initiative of timid questioning of such customary national practice by president Lugo's government was quickly resolved last year by a scarcely veiled coup d'état (more information:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/22/washington-fernando-lugo-ouster-paraguay>) ran by the then vice-president and his Liberal Party that sorted things out again. In favour of agro-business and the very rich in general.



Colorado Party headquarters in Asunción

No wonder thus that when I met my Aché friends (I actually only managed to recognize one) in the very same Curuguaty area (Canindeyú Department) again after over 20 years, to see their suffering “modernized” in their 780 hectare village of Arroyo Bandera. This very interesting people was one of the very last in the East (if not THE last) to be forced to give up “contact”-resistance and centuries old life style almost overnight in the 1970s amidst busy man hunting enterprise to either enslave them or kill them off. (No, I did NOT mix up the centuries, I meant the 1970s! Not the 1870s. For more information on the Aché people see: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~krhill3/Ache.html>)



Arroyo Bandera, an Aché village of 200, surrounded by soya monoculture and constant victim of pesticide spraying from planes

Modern times haven't brought a change of the core goal but more subtle ways of proceeding. The soya business, any monoculture, isn't “only” lethal to people it's also lethal to the soil, the water, Life as a whole. Due to its need and use of absurd quantities of pesticides.

Now guess what happens when you have a small Native American village surrounded by a soya baron's or agribusiness owned land. In 21st century Paraguay. Even if the most skillful pilot would try to not hit the community with the gas being sprayed it would be impossible not to affect the entire community, their people, young and old, their livestock, their patches, their houses and schools. But they don't make an effort anyway. Since it's in accordance with the ultimate objective. Get rid of "the plague". And incorporate the little tiny piece of land that's still not under their "legal" control.

Under such pressure and manipulation it is no wonder that Native communities clear their last remaining pieces of forests, just like the Guaraní community Mboy Jagua, neighbours to the Aché village of Arroyo Bandera, in order to "follow the leader" and also plant soya. The forest is cleared by machinery of the soya baron, a "help" that indebts the Amerindians, just like the "help" with the seeds and pesticides. So they lose their last islands of woods (where they could still get small prey, birds mainly, out of it and medicinal herbs) get indebted and join in such de-facto-slave-labourer conditions the soya business. Great deal for the soya barons.



Game over for the last piece of forest of the Mboy Jagua Guaraní

Yet, with all the poisoning and less food-for-eating production people tend to abandon the place. In search of something better. Anything different, that is. An act of desperation that washes them to the next city. Where they erect a shack made of pieces of plastic hood and boards from garbage pits. And where soon their child daughters will have to be on the game...



Since public money never arrives this is the best building in Mboy Jagua:
Their brand new school - built with foreign private help

And basically the same story goes for the Ava Guaraní, who were driven from their rightful lands when construction for the hydroelectric power plant at Itaipú, a tourist attraction today, started in 1975. And who are still waiting for a new place and compensation.

Tidy clean genocide. The modern Paraguayan way. And that will go on and on until the last Native has fallen, as long as nobody DOES something against it NOW. Like you and me. And YES it MUST be you and me, because if you'd count on the Paraguayan authorities, you'd do something like betting on the NRA to ban weapons.

When I took my client to the Chaco (the Paraguayan semi-arid West) I took advantage to meet with over a dozen of Native American leaders and with the bishop of Boquerón who is also in charge of the (catholic) *pastoral indígena* in Paraguay.

And what I heard and saw on paper showed synchrony to the "developments" in the East. Although the Chaco climate and soils are by far not as suitable for profit-oriented monocultures as they are in the East, the very cheap price for land (the cheapest in South America) have increasingly attracted capitalists ("investors" is the preferred euphemism) from Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, but also from North America and Europe. Yet, although these "locust entrepreneurs" (that's *my* preferred way to call them) know that mono-pesticide-culture on such poor soils will leave, after only a few cash harvests, a complete and irreversible desert behind, in their neo-liberal "logic" it's worth it.

So land has been selling like hot rolls. And got scarce. But there are still "reserves". With the problem though that these are Native American lands and by Paraguayan Constitution unmarketable.

Yet, what does a law count in Paraguay? Or, in clearer English: HOW MUCH does it count?

Just the right sum for the right guy. And it is, at least for Paraguay insiders, just as little of a surprise that the very leading civil servants of INDI (*Instituto Paraguayo del Indígena*, the state authority to aid the Amerindians) sell Native American lands (with a few disguising tricks), than petty police officials "asking" foreigners for a "small contribution to the police forces of Paraguay" at any check point. Better: cash point. That IS Paraguay.



Typical Chaco flora

Native American communities only get aware of their sold land when the bulldozers arrive and start to clean the dry forests. Or, in remoter cases further away from the one main road, when helicopters come. Sometimes with people aboard who shoot at Native bands on the ground. Preventive troublemaker cleansing.

Yet, at least in one case, the Paraguayan way didn't work out. So far. Since the business partners hadn't reckoned with the militancy of the affected Guaraní Ñandéva and the "loud voice" of an ally of theirs, monsignor Alfert, the "Amerindians' bishop".



Meeting of Amerindian leaders of the Chaco who fought back

The Guaraní Ñandéva managed to organize a massive protest and brought the Transchaco Highway (the only paved road from and to Bolivia) to two successive standstills earlier this year. While the bishop brought the subject to and into the national media and the (then) president's office. (Check: <http://www.abc.com.py/edicion-impresa/locales/obispo-alfert-lamenta-que-el-indi-haya-vendido-tierra-de-los-indigenas-548248.html>)



The "Amerindians' Bishop" Alfert

The sale of the 25.000 hectares of the Cuyabía area, constitutionally unsellable Native American land since 1996, to a Mrs. Julia Beatriz Vargas Meza on November 20, 2012 was officially questioned in writing by the *Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya* and is since then in a judicial limbo situation. But the bulldozers were withdrawn. After Amerindian leaders from all over the Chaco made it clear that they would burn. If they wouldn't be withdrawn.

Yet, the future doesn't look too bright. The bishop one day soon will be gone and in a world globalized under neo-liberal imperatives Amerindian communities who dare to resist and are actually a living and shining COUNTER-EXAMPLE to the lethal greed of the ruling model stand, logically, for a thorn in the flesh of big business. And they cannot expect any protection or even respect towards their constitutional rights from the Paraguayan authorities. As I have tried to expose to you briefly: quite the contrary.



Along the Transchaco Highway

I thus wish to close this report with the repetition of my appeal. PLEASE GET INVOLVED. You CAN make the difference. By NOT including Paraguay in any near future holiday plans and BY MAKING "NOISE".

By spreading the word and the appeal via your own private communication network. By asking the teachers you know to include this contemporary subject of social studies and (abused) human rights in their educational work. And, last not least, by donating fifteen minutes of your precious time. In order to write an e-mail or a brief note of protest in which you notify your decision of NOT VISITING the country as long as such genocidal practice goes on and have it sent to the next Paraguayan representation (embassy or consulate). Or/plus give them a call.

“International Solidarity” is not an empty phrase. As long as we don't give in,
thus making it one!

One World – Many Cultures
ArDaga