



Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations

The Only Multi-Racial Worldwide Indigenous Confederacy In Existence

Indigenous clans call for recognition of their rights

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We have the United Nations on our side'

As the United Nations called for respect for the rights of the 370 million indigenous people around the world on Wednesday– International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples — local descendants of Trinidad's First Peoples are pushing to claim their own rights.

In Cumaca, members of indigenous clans who still live in the forests are deeply upset and concerned about unregulated quarrying that is encroaching on their ancestral lands. While to the south, members of the Warao clan are calling for recognition by the state and research and re-education about the history of our indigenous peoples, and their links to clans in the Orinoco Delta of Venezuela.

Rabina Shar, spokesman for the Elders Council of the Warao of the southwestern peninsula, said his people want constitutional recognition by the Government of their rights as descendants of the original

inhabitants of these islands, before Christopher Columbus arrived and claimed it for Spain.

"We are the descendants of the revolutionaries who fought against the Spaniards," Shar said. "Our clans have been existing here for the last 7,000 years..." The 61-year-old, who claims 80 percent indigenous lineage, says there are also many descendants of Warao in the southeast of Trinidad, and their ancestral lands are bounded to the north by Naparima Hill, which has special significance for the Warao. They believe the spirits of their two earth gods, Waro Waro and Nabarima, live there, and that their first parents, the parents of all the First Peoples in Trinidad, were born there.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on September 13, 2007, mandates that the TnT Government, which is a signatory to the declaration, recognise the rights of our indigenous peoples. Article 8 states:

1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for:

- (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities;*
- (b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources;*
- (c) Any form of forced population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights;*
- (d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration;*
- (e) Any form of propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination directed against them.*

In Cumaca, according to Nepoyo clan elder Barere Kushi, quarry operators are encroaching on their sacred grounds and changing the ecology of the forests.

He claims trucks from St. Albans Sand and Gravel Company are destroying rivers and forests.

Attempts to contact St. Albans and president of the Quarry Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Ramdeo (Dan) Persad, proved futile.

“All of the Cumaca is sacred to us,” said Kushi. “This is handed down from generation to generation. In the lower foothills some of the younger descendants of the First People live in the Valencia area, a few in the Plantation Road area and Paradise Hill.

“They are worried about the last 50 acres that are left of that part of the plateau, an area once vegetated by rare plant life, like the famous Valencia Fern, which used to decorate the homes of many Trinidadians in the past at Christmas time,” said Kushi.

Much of the forest has been destroyed by legal and mostly illegal mining of gravel, he claims.

In the past the ancestors of the Cumaca First People the rainforests from the scared site of El Tecuche to the lower plains and foothills of Valencia, which included the Aripo Savannah.

The savannah was their food basket and hunting grounds, and the rivers were full of fish and prawns, recalled Kushi.

The St. Albans Sand and Gravel Company excavated first the trees, then the overburden was removed and dumped into the Turure River at the first bridge, he says. This dumping is killing what is left in the river downstream from the first bridge. A rare species of river fish, the fresh water cutlass fish, which the Cumaca enjoyed as a delicacy, has disappeared.

The quarry trucks raise sand and dust which get into their homes and cover everything, Kushi says. In addition, a cesspit operator has been dumping sewage into some of the ponds created by illegal excavation of gravel in different parts of Valencia.

“The First People of Cumaca are appealing for support from environmental groups to join us in protesting against the degrading of our lands,” said Kushi.

Article 10 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states clearly that “Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories.

No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return.”

The UN Centre for Information in Port of Spain has confirmed that the descendants of the First Peoples are entitled to press for their rights, and is willing to assist them in accessing the protocol through which they can be recognised by the committee set up by the UN to ensure that the recommendations of the General Assembly are enforced.