

# Support the return of the Nukak-Maku to their ancestral lands in Colombia

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*Source: Colombia Human Rights Committee*

Through the work of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), the Social Ministries office of the Catholic Church of southeastern Colombia, and several other dedicated individuals and agencies working in Colombia, you now have an opportunity to help save a unique Amazonian people from extinction. We are trying to raise \$7,000 in the next month so that approximately 100 of an estimated 400 surviving Nukak can return from San José del Guaviare to the jungle habitat that has been their home for the last 11,000 years.

Who are the Nukak-Maku and why did they leave the jungle? The population of Nukak was estimated at about 1,000 individuals when the first group emerged in 1988. Since then, the population has diminished to approximately 400 to 450. Most continued to live in the jungle, following their traditional way of life, until encounters with armed groups led a group of about 80 to emerge, once again, in 2003, followed by approximately 125 in March 2006. Though no one had been killed in their contacts with armed groups, there were misunderstandings stemming from incidents in which some Nukak came across a food cache of the guerrilla movement Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) as well as grenades left behind as a result of carelessness. In the extreme western part of the traditional Nukak territory there have also been armed confrontations between FARC and the paramilitary group

Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) after the latter established itself in the region in 1997.

The Nukak-Maku are a hunter-gatherer people who lived mostly in isolation, on a semi-nomadic basis, between the Guaviare and Inírida rivers, in the northeastern sector of the department of Guaviare. They have lived in clans of 25 to 30 individuals who travel barefoot, making temporary shelters, and living on a diet mainly of monkeys, fish, and fruits. Historically they were enslaved by other indigenous peoples. According to Tucano and Cubeo (other Amazonian indigenous groups) mythology, they were the last of the peoples to emerge from the Uaracapuri, or Blue Anaconda, considered to be at the origin of various peoples of the region. Except for occasional sightings at a distance, they were mostly not known until a group of 41 emerged from the jungle in 1988 looking for help, as they'd been struck by a flu epidemic, stemming from increased pressures on their habitat by expanding coca plantations and armed groups.

Why do the Nukak-Maku need to return? The Nukak who have emerged from the jungle have lived in miserable conditions in and around San José del Guaviare. Their absolute autonomy from the money economy has been replaced by total dependence on government hand-outs, which are woefully inadequate. Most have been forced to live in overcrowded quarters, resulting in the proliferation of disease and a process of loss of their identity. The ONIC, the Social Ministries office of the Catholic Church, and a small group of anthropologists, some of whom had gone to live with the Nukak years ago and learn their language and way of life, have been working with the displaced in recent months. Of the 200 or so Nukak living around San José del Guaviare, approximately 100 have indicated their desire to return to their traditional territory by April 30 of this year. However, they have called for a series of guarantees, including:

- that a delegation made up of Nukak representatives, ONIC delegates, and the parish priest first go to the region to verify that the conditions are adequate for their return;
- that a health service be established in the Wayari region, where they would return to, to provide health care

in the jungle or to which patients with emergencies could be evacuated; - that other programs be established in the medium and long term to attend to needs in education, nutrition, and strengthening their own culture.

What will this money be used for? The cost of the initial delegation to verify conditions is estimated at 1.5 to 2 million pesos, i.e. US\$ 650 to US \$850. The cost of transportation for the return is estimated at 25,000,000 pesos, or about US\$ 12,000. In February we already raised and sent \$1,000, enough to cover the initial delegation.

Survival of indigenous peoples: A factor for peace and the environment.

- The indigenous peoples of the Amazon hold precious knowledge about coexistence with the jungle. To the extent that they continue to live in their traditional habitat, this knowledge will be preserved. - In Colombia the survival of indigenous peoples is a factor for peace. Indigenous peoples have been targeted by all actors in the armed conflict, who seek to expand their control of land. The area to which the displaced Nukak-Maku intend to return to is not a conflict zone, and guarantees have been secured from those armed actors who have had a presence in parts of the Nukak territory that they will be respected.

Why send assistance through the CHRC? The Colombia Human Rights Committee of Washington, D.C. has a 25-year history of working and networking on behalf of human rights in Colombia with a wide array of organizations and communities in Colombia that uphold human rights and work for peaceful change by peaceful means. It was in this context that the CHRC participated in an "International Verification Mission" in September 2006 to look into the human rights situation of indigenous communities throughout Colombia, organized by the ONIC. The Mission included a visit to Guaviare, where we met with about 70 of the displaced Nukak. The photos attached were taken then by activist photographer Jesús Abad Colorado. The Mission also met with government authorities in San José, who explained that the key reason the government wasn't sending them back, despite their miserable conditions as displaced persons, was that they didn't have the 15,000,000 pesos (approximately US\$ 6,500) that the transportation required would cost.

TO SUPPORT THE NUKAK RETURN, PLEASE SEND A CHECK TO "COLOMBIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE" AND PUT "NUKAK RETURN" IN THE MEMO LINE. THE COLOMBIA HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE IS A 501(c)(3) TAX-EXEMPT NON-PROFIT, SO YOUR DONATION WILL BE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE. ALL MONIES COLLECTED WILL BE FORWARD TO THE ONIC. MAIL YOUR CHECK TO: CHRC, P.O. BOX 3130, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20010.

For more information, please write to the Colombia Human Rights Committee at [colhrc@igc.org](mailto:colhrc@igc.org). You can also call and leave a message at 202-232-8148, and we'll call you back.

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