



## **SARSTOON TEMASH INSTITUTE FOR INDIGENOUS MANAGEMENT**

6 Pampana Street • Punta Gorda Town; Toledo • Belize C.A •

Phone: 501-722-0103 • Fax: 501-722-0124

Email: [satiim@btl.net](mailto:satiim@btl.net) • Website: [www.satiim.org.bz](http://www.satiim.org.bz)

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### **Press Release**

**April 20, 2009**

### **The Right to be included**

We at the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management are outraged and shocked at the decision of the Forest Department to grant permission to US Capital Energy to enter the Sarstoon Temash National Park for the purpose of conducting seismic testing activities. Particularly outrageous is the unilateral and secret manner in which the government chose to grant the permission. These perpetual and blatant policies of social exclusion and persistent discrimination only serve to close the doors of opportunities which our efforts and that of our legal team had hoped to eliminate by our 2006 Supreme Court lawsuit. SATIIM has met with the leadership of our indigenous communities and we collectively want to make known that we are deeply disappointed and feel betrayed by the Prime Minister who had secured a new opportunity for us and felt that he would protect these salient values and ideals we fought so hard for in 2006.

The Ministry of Natural Resources has been quick to say that our co-management agreement expired in 2008. We accept this fact however; there has been discussions and an understanding between the government and the Association of Protected Areas Management Organization (APAMO) regarding the status of co-management agreements that had expired. Notwithstanding this precarious arrangement we have never failed and have never abandoned the responsibilities entrusted to us – which are to manage and protect our natural resources and our national interest along the Belize-Guatemala border. We continue to execute our responsibilities even in the face of a hostile and life threatening environment.

While the court did not rule that seismic testing is illegal inside a national park we maintain that seismic testing which is a precursor to oil development is inconsistent with the spirit of the National Parks Act that our legal team in 2006 tried to vigorously substantiate. While we are not opposed to development, we maintain that:

1. The government's exclusion of SATIIM and the communities and the lack of transparency in the issuance of the permit continue to create uncertainties on whether the ecological values and the fragility of some of the ecosystems

particularly the wetlands in the park are seriously evaluated and excluded from the seismic activities. We are concerned that the seismic trails will only serve to improve open access to poachers to the sensitive areas of the park. We have made concrete proposals to both government and US Capital Energy to address some of these concerns. Our exclusion from the process further creates doubts as to who will be responsible to monitor the areas after US Capital Energy moves out which is compounded by not knowing how it will be done. While our desire is to benefit in a tangible way, we are cognizant of our responsibilities to vigilantly safeguard the fragile ecosystems of the park and that of the wider region to ensure these systems continue to sustain our livelihoods. We can only continue with these enormous tasks if we are allowed to participate in all and any activities that can potentially undermine the ecological integrity of the areas.

2. Any decision to permit oil development or to alter the status of the park must take into account the injustices resulting from the violation of the fundamental rights and interests of the indigenous people as a consequence of the establishment of the park. We had been optimistic by the statement made by the Prime Minister to make a special dispensation for the Toledo District at his 29 May, 2008 press conference in relation to oil development in Toledo. However, the secrecy in which the government is handling the activities at this initial stage and our obvious exclusion dampen any hope that the intention expressed by the Prime Minister will become a reality. We expected an open and fair process to discuss these matters prior to the start of the seismic survey phase.

As we consider this injustice, our resolve is anchored on the fundamental principles and values that fuel our struggles two years ago. SATIIM and the communities will continue to meet to consider all and any options available to bring attention to the important national concerns that is being ignored by the government. We call on the Prime Minister to reconsider the permit and or insist on a process that will have the inclusion of SATIIM and its indigenous communities.