



[Tomás Galeano, leader of the Yakye Axa community.](#)

[Credit:David Vargas/IPS](#) (IPS) - Indigenous Enxet people are still waiting for the restitution of their ancestral lands, nearly three years after the Paraguayan state was convicted by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights of usurping territory and violating basic rights. Meanwhile, they endure overwhelming poverty.

The 55 families of the village of Yakye Axa are struggling to survive on the edge of the road joining Concepción to Pozo Colorado, 370 kilometres from Asunción, in the rugged Chaco region.

Their flimsy wooden huts face 15,000 hectares of land that is theirs by right, but which is still in the hands of the Loma Verde cattle ranching company.

“All this used to be ours,” said the elderly cacique (chief) Tomás Galeano, indicating the huge ranch surrounded by wire fencing.

In pre-Columbian times, the Enxet people roamed over a large part of the west bank of the Paraguay River and the adjacent land. Their traditional territory covered an area of approximately 7,000 square kilometres.

Galeano, a longtime leader of the community and one of the main promoters of the Enxets' struggle, does not remember his age, but he has vivid memories of going hunting with his father and other members of the tribe in the vast territory.

Hunting is still one of the Enxet's means of subsistence, but it is practised much less now, because they cannot enter their lands.

The Paraguayan state was ordered in 2005 by the Inter-American Court to hand over the lands claimed by the Enxet within a maximum of three years, to pay material damages, to apologise publicly to the indigenous people and to provide health care and food for them until they were back on their land.

Paraguay: Fourteen Years in the Wilderness

Written by David Vargas
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The court also required the creation of a special fund of 950,000 dollars for educational, housing, agricultural and health projects, as well as for the provision of drinking water and sanitation.

On Jul. 13 the deadline stipulated by the court will be up, but "little has been done," the head of the governmental Paraguayan Indigenous Institute (INDI), Amado Alvarenga, admitted to IPS.

"We have made progress, within the constraints of our budget," but the court stipulated the provision of "food security, productive security and land ownership, and as INDI cannot afford all that, we do what we can to show that at least we're interested," he said.

This interest is expressed in the creation, this year, of a 600,000-dollar fund to buy the property, according to Alvarenga. But that is only half the value of the land, he said.

Furthermore, the company occupying the land refuses to sell, so the only solution is expropriation, which requires the passage of a law. A draft law will be presented to the new Congress which takes up its duties on Jul. 1, he said.

An indemnity of 45,000 dollars has been paid, in three instalments from August 2006. The community held an assembly and decided to spend the money on food, medicines, clothing and other items such as beds and chairs. Part of it was distributed equally to all the members for personal use.

In what was an unprecedented event in Paraguayan history, representatives of INDI and the Foreign, Health and Education Ministries acknowledged their responsibility for the neglect of these indigenous people in December 2006, asked their pardon and committed themselves to fulfil the injunction of the Inter-American Court.

"It was a nice ceremony, but it was just empty promises," Galeano told IPS.

At present, the families receive food, drinking water and health care

sporadically and in insufficient quantity.

Galeano's hut is made of palm tree wood and corrugated iron sheets. He has no running water or electricity. The nearest water is carried on foot from a lagoon several kilometres away.

Health problems are rife, especially diarrhoea and other stomach ailments attributable to drinking unsanitary water.

In the Enxet language, Yakye Axa means 'palm grove'. Palm trees are abundant in the Chaco region.

Their history is 'a repetition of what happens with indigenous communities in our country,' Óscar Ayala, the head of the non-governmental organisation Tierraviva which is helping the Enxet with their land claim, told IPS.

'These were lands without property titles, which were transferred from one 'owner' to another since the state privatised them 100 years ago,' he said.

The Enxet lived in this territory until 1984, when they were persuaded by Anglican missionaries to move to a property owned by the Church, about 300 kilometres further north in the Chaco.

'The people left because of the Anglican Church, which at that time had a policy of founding settlements. The Yakye Axa family, though, did not adapt to the way of life and after a time decided to return to their former home,' Ayala said.

Galeano was one of the first to return, in 1993, but the then 'owners' of the place would not let him in. He decided to camp by the side of the road and begin pressuring the government for the return of the ancestral lands.

Little by little, others joined his crusade. A decade later, after much fruitless effort, with the help of Tierraviva and the non-governmental Centre for

Justice and International Law, they took their case against the state to the Inter-American system.

"We will continue the struggle. The Chaco belongs to indigenous people, so we cannot lose. We will not tire, either," said Freddy Flores, a member of the community.

Beyond the unfamiliar language and the community's high level of organisation, what most impresses the visitor to the community is the appallingly long list of their needs.

Reduced to absolute poverty, many of these indigenous people find themselves forced to work as cheap labour on the ranches.

A single classroom, made of wood with a corrugated iron roof, is the school for 40 children in morning and afternoon shifts.

"We teach preschool, first and second grades," said teacher Rodika Mabel. The children have to share the few donated desks, or sit on the floor. There are no teaching aids.

According to Tierraviva, the illiteracy rate is 90 percent.

The children have learning difficulties because of malnutrition, Mabel said. "They can't concentrate because they don't have enough to eat."

The Education Ministry never sent any assistance, and the government of the province of Presidente Hayes, where the village is located, has only once this year delivered a school snack: bread and milk.

The state's food aid is a monthly package per family with five kilogrammes of rice, maté (a popular infusion in this South American region), noodles, oil and salt.

These foods "do not have significant nutritional value. A study of the children by volunteer nurses from the University of Virginia found that most of them are suffering from severe under-nutrition," said Julia Cabello, a

Tierraviva legal adviser.

This community is but one of many examples of extreme neglect in the western region of Paraguay. According to a report by Tierraviva, the Enxet communities, totalling some 12,000 people, are struggling to reclaim 176,057 hectares in Presidente Hayes, where over seven million hectares are devoted to cattle ranching.

In 1992, a new constitution recognised indigenous peoples and their cultures as pre-existent to the creation of the state, and the government undertook to restore part of their lands to the native communities.

According to the latest census, held in 2002, there are 87,000 indigenous people in 17 ethnic groups, making up 1.6 percent of the Paraguayan population of six million.

Out of 182 indigenous communities, 85 have no land and live a marginalised existence in confinement and poverty.