

SURINAME

The indigenous Amerindian and Maroon people living in Suriname's southern rainforest region (the interior, covering about 80% of the country's land area) number approximately 50,000 people, representing 8% of the population. The Amerindian people are descendents of the original inhabitants of the Amazon. Maroons are descendents of African slaves who escaped from coastal plantations, fought a war of liberation, and today live in the rainforest far removed from the areas that are economically developed. Amerindian and Maroon communities live in more than 50 riverside villages and rely on subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing. Maroons, having a tradition of trade with the Dutch coastal colony, are more integrated into the cash economy than are indigenous communities.

The key legislation and policies governing Amerindian and Maroon peoples' affairs are the 1982 L-Decree on Principles of Land Policy, the 1986 Mining Decree, the 1992 Forestry Management Act, the 1992 Accord for National Reconciliation and Development (Peace Accords) and the 2006 Suriname Land Management Project (SLMP).

The Suriname Land Management Project

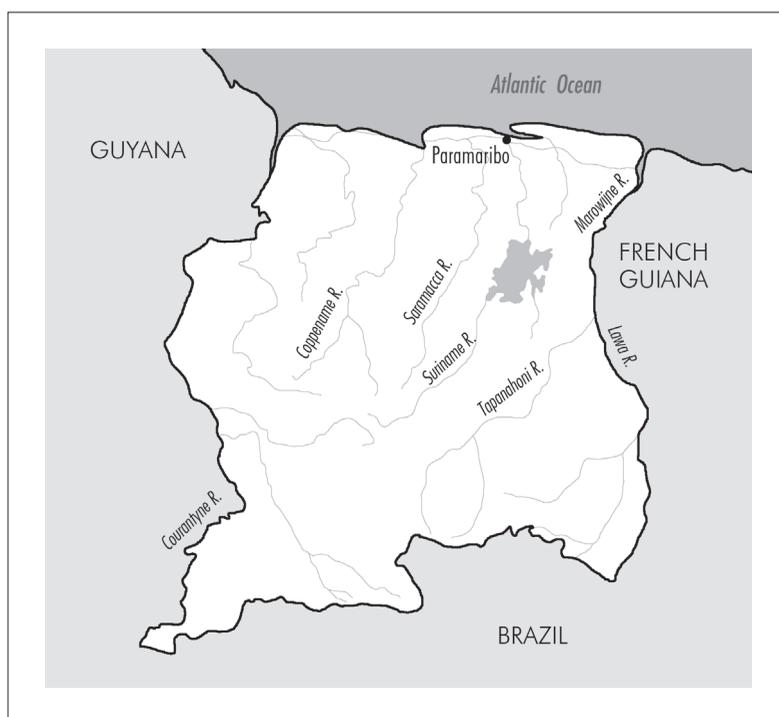
A project developed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) will replace traditional land tenure systems in Amerindian and Maroon areas with an "active market system for land". An assumption underlying this open land market system is that it will provide equal access to land to all market competitors because anyone can buy or lease at the market rate. Not everybody, however, is a market

competitor. Since Amerindian and Maroon people in the interior are not recognized as having a legal claim to their traditional territories and because they do not have the financial or social capital to compete with foreigners for title of their traditional lands, this project will result in the transfer of land to foreign investors and IDB donors. Traditional land tenure systems based on principles of social organization and kinship relations rather than on principles of market economy and transactions will be eradicated in favor of a global market system.

On 23 February 2006, the IDB presented the Suriname Land Management Project (SLMP) to the Government of Suriname. In a separate meeting that same day, an IDB operations specialist told staff from the US non-profit Suriname Indigenous Health Fund (SIHF), "The SLMP is a final solution that will settle all land disputes in Suriname, including indigenous lands in the southern interior region where gold and timber resources are concentrated". This revelation conflicted directly with the IDB's earlier statements that the project did not have a component related to land rights in the interior but simply aimed to create a land market in Suriname by removing legal and institutional constraints to free alienation of title. Publicly, the IDB claimed that the SLMP would only include a policy note stressing the importance of resolving land issues in the interior but that these issues would be kept separate from the SLMP.

According to the operations specialist speaking to the SIHF, the SLMP (which is not available to the public for review or comment) "does in fact define policy for Maroon and Amerindian groups in Suriname. In addition to policy, the SLMP will also draft legislation and regulations necessary for the government to implement the land policy for the interior groups. Once the legislation has been approved by parliament, the policy can be implemented. However, implementation of the policy will not take place in the first phase of the SLMP. The reason is that the legislation needs to be drafted and placed into law first. This will take three years, depending on how fast the government moves".

Since 1982, when the military government reformed the land tenure system with the intention of eliminating speculation, the government has resisted the capitalist principle of private ownership. At a land rights conference held in May 2006 in Kwamalasemutu, an indigenous village near the border with Brazil, representatives from the IDB



responded to the government's reluctance to adopt the SLMP policies with a threat saying, "a the government does not adopt the policies regarding the land rights of the indigenous people as defined in the SLMP, the country cannot borrow money from the Bank".

Chris Healy, a Surinamese anthropologist commenting on land tenure for the Ministry of Natural Resources in Suriname, argues that the government should respect the rights of the indigenous and Maroon peoples to remain who they are and to live the way they want to live, even if it means they will remain outside the cash economy because they cannot make their assets fungible. "I think it would be wise to adopt a more accommodative land tenure policy towards the interior of Suriname," says Healy. This vision is shared by the Ministry of Regional Development, which believes the Peace Accord leaves room for both advocates of preserving the traditional way of life and those who wish to assimilate into the mainstream Suriname economy. Ac-

ording to Healy, the open-ended language of the Peace Accord was “consciously adopted in order to accommodate the aspirations of both factions”.

A threat to all indigenous peoples in Suriname

While all land in the interior of Suriname is considered to be the property of the government (domain land) the primary laws currently in place in Suriname, which are known as the L-Decrees, give the indigenous and tribal people “entitlements” to their villages and agricultural plots, “as much as possible, unless there is a conflict with the general interest”. A major problem with the L-Decrees is that the entitlements only apply to their villages and the current agricultural plots and do not account for their wider territories and other lands occupied and used for hunting, fishing and other subsistence and cultural activities.

Historically, the indigenous people in the resource-rich interior have been the only Surinamese citizens whose rights were only to be “taken into account as much as possible”. The chairman of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples in Suriname, Nardo Aluman, said at the land rights conference held in Kwamalasemutu, “We are fighting for the land rights of both the Amerindian and Maroon people, because we are one. We live together in the interior in harmony. We are the Interior People.”

Another key point that must be considered is that, as a result of the SLMP, ownership of all natural resources will be distinct from that of land ownership. All minerals and timber within Suriname’s territories will therefore continue to be owned by the state. Regardless of land tenure or entitlements, under the SLMP, the massive expansion of gold, bauxite and diamond mining in Suriname will cause immense problems for the indigenous and tribal people. Currently, mining activities put tons of toxins into the interior environment each year, compromising the health and food security of interior people (read more about this in *The Indigenous World 2005*). These activities will be greatly expanded under the SLMP. More importantly, people will be displaced by mining operations. Already, N’dujka village of Nieuw Koffiekamp,

located north of Brownsberg Nature Park and west of Brokopondo, faces a forcible relocation for the second time in forty years. A resident of Nieuw Koffiekamp told SIHF staff that he would never move again, "We will fight – we will die first."

Floods displace thousands

On May 9, torrential rains in Suriname resulted in major floods that displaced an estimated 35,000 tribal and indigenous people. Interior villages were confronted with completely destroyed homes, gardens and livelihoods. The Dutch, the EU and the US attempted to provide relief. In order to reach the victims quickly, local commercial flight companies were used to transport emergency goods. Transport costs absorbed most of the financial aid meant for the victims. The crisis caused by the floods, an unprecedented natural disaster, was exacerbated by the fact that cyanide retention pools and mercury pits were flooded as well, dumping tons of toxic chemicals into the waterways that tribal and indigenous people depend on. A gold rush that began a decade ago has attracted tens of thousands of miners who use toxic chemicals such as mercury and cyanide to process gold.

Concluding remarks

For indigenous people, the land allocation system that will be put in place by the SLMP will be a disaster. Displacement and declining public health from exposure to mining waste will endanger all people living in the interior. Indigenous people do not have the financial or social capital to compete with foreigners for title to their traditional lands.

The current policy of the IDB, namely that it will not lend money to the Government of Suriname until it acknowledges indigenous land rights, appears benign on the surface. While this policy is designed to put pressure on the government to adopt the SLMP as soon as possible, forever "resolving" land disputes with forest peoples, the outcome of the SLMP will be devastating for the indigenous living in Suriname's

interior. However indigenous lands are titled, the government will retain all lucrative mineral rights, as well as the right to move indigenous communities as deemed appropriate in the interests of the state. Whatever land title indigenous groups may have, the state holds their fate, as they will retain the rights to all natural resources.

The SLMP, introduced in 2006, and scheduled to be fully implemented by 2011, is a neo-liberal structural adjustment program that will promote the interests of foreign investors and mining companies at the expense of the Amerindian and Maroon people in Suriname's interior. It was developed against a post-colonial background shared with other Caribbean nations. Similarities in society, economy and culture mean that many of the land policy issues facing Suriname today are relevant elsewhere in the region. Suriname's actions relating to land tenure will thus have consequences for the entire Caribbean. □