

Ecuador's Awá Win Nullification of Land Measure

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Ecuador's Awá win nullification of land measure Quito, Ecuador Traveling some stretches on foot and others by bus, more than 500 members of Ecuador's Awá indigenous community trekked this month from their villages near the country's northern border with Colombia to this high-altitude capital, spears symbolically in hand.

Their objective was to protest a recent government land-management measure that the Awá claim would give timber and oil-palm plantation operators access to a portion of their territory in coastal Esmeraldas province, jeopardizing their internationally recognized efforts to practice sustainable forestry there.

On July 11-two days after the Awá arrived in Quito-Environment Minister Ana Albán produced what they wanted: nullification of the land-management measure. The government also pledged to review the status of a 14,800-acre (6,000-ha) area of land in Carchi province that was removed from the Awá territory last year.

Precipitating this month's protest was a January Environment Ministry order that the Awá and the local Afro-Ecuadorian community must jointly manage 43,226 acres (17,493 has) in Ricaurte-Tululbí parish, which is part of Esmeraldas province's canton of San Lorenzo. Albán signed the order after Afro-Ecuadorians, whose roots reach back to the Spanish colonial era, argued they have valid historical claims to the area.

The Awá complained the move nixed government decisions making the Ricaurte-Tululbí land part of the tribe's officially recognized 245,467-acre (99,337-ha) territory, which stretches from mountainous Imbabura and Carchi provinces to the Pacific Coast province of Esmeraldas. They argued Esmeraldas's largely impoverished Afro-Ecuadorian communities have allowed extensive deforestation on their lands as timber and palm-oil interests have made inroads in the area. And they charged that those hoping to cash in on that trend orchestrated the push for the co-management plan, stoking tension between the Awá and Afro-Ecuadorians so they could make further incursions into the region's primary forest.

Forest destruction has become a growing concern here. Authorities say the country's annual deforestation rate of 1.5% is Latin America's highest, and that the brunt of the clearing is occurring in Esmeraldas.

"These people hide behind [Afro-Ecuadorians] to make it seem this is an ethnic conflict," says Olindo Nastacuaz, president of the Awá Centers Federation of Ecuador (FCAE). "...They want to take over our lands and forests to sell the natural riches."

Awá Supporters Weigh In

Awá supporters in Ecuador and abroad urged authorities to reverse course. In a March letter to Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, Carter Roberts, director of WWF's U.S. branch, cited extensive conservation and sustainable-development work the Awá have done with WWF using funds from donors including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the European Union and the MacArthur Foundation. "It is a fact that conservation of this territory is the result of the dedicated action of the Awá communities there and of their Federation," Roberts wrote. "...The Awá communities have protected these forests, resisting pressure for African palm agro-industrial expansion and industrial-forestry exploitation [and] seeking viable alternatives to maintain the integrity of their territory and culture."

Antonio Caraballi, an Afro-Ecuadorian spokesman in northern Esmeraldas, argues his community merely seeks an integral region for itself. He asserts the Awá, which he describes as newly arrived, threaten this goal. And he says Afro-Ecuadorians would care for the environment and preserve their lands in a forest reserve, though he could not specify how logging and palm operations would be controlled.

Awá leaders dispute the charge that they have a weaker historical claim to the land, citing the fact that local rivers carry Awá names. They acknowledge Esmeraldas is majority Afro-Ecuadorian. But they say their presence in the region clearly predates the colonial-era arrival of blacks. Further, they point out that the area within San Lorenzo that was designated for co-management is populated exclusively by Awá.

Juan Solórzano, an Afro-Ecuadorian leader who is president of a local San Lorenzo citizens' body, acknowledges the situation is complicated. "To some degree both sides are right because blacks have traditionally lived in San Lorenzo, but at the same time it must be recognized that there also has been a presence of Chachi, Awá and Cepará," he says. Solórzano adds that while Afro-Ecuadorians do not currently live on the land that was slated for co-management, they've had a presence in the immediate vicinity "for some time."

Forests under siege

Manolo Morales, president of the Steering Committee of Ecuadorian Environmental Organizations (Cedenma), says land in northern Esmeraldas has come under intense pressure. Timber and palm interests-the latter expanding in part to cash in on demand for biodiesel fuel, which can be made from palm oil-have felled Afro-Ecuadorian forests. Says Morales: "Since the Ibarra-San Lorenzo highway was opened in 1999 and loggers and oil-palm growers arrived in this region, some 99,000 acres (40,000 has) of forest have been converted to African palm plantations, and thousands of cubic meters of timber have been extracted from Afro-Ecuadorian and Chachi community forests north of the Awá territory."

Jaime Levy, director of the nonprofit Fundación Altrópico, says that as Esmeraldas's primary forest has disappeared, the Awá woodlands have attracted growing interest. Much of that interest, he says, comes from two large plywood-exporters, Peña Durini and Álvarez Barba, that-directly or through intermediaries-have been obtaining timber from Esmeraldas woodlands for years.

"That's why there's so much pressure on the Awá territory, because it's the only large area they haven't been able to enter yet to take out wood," says Levy, who has worked extensively with the Awá on sustainable-forestry initiatives. "This is the true nub of the conflict...All that has prevented incursions is that the Awá have said that if [loggers] enter their territory, they're going to fight, and [the loggers] are afraid of being confronted."

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