



Oearthright



OPIT



To: Environment Ministers of members of the Alliance for the Conservation of Rainforests

Cc: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Paraguay (MADES), National Forest Institute of Paraguay (INFONA), UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples Francisco Calí Tzay, European Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commission Vice-President/High Representative Josep Borrell Fontelles, MEP Delara Burkhardt, MEP Anna Cavazzini, MEP and Vice-President of the European Parliament Heidi Hautala

Open Letter: Call for members of the Alliance for the Conservation of Rainforests to urge the Paraguayan government to ensure the immediate cessation of illegal invasions and deforestation of Ayoreo Totobiegosode lands, and to title all requested lands to the indigenous people

1 November 2021

Dear Ministers,

We, the undersigned, express our deep concern at the lack of action by the Paraguayan authorities to comply with precautionary measures issued by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) to prevent the continued deforestation and third-party invasions of a large area of land belonging to an indigenous people, the Ayoreo Totobiegosode, in the Paraguayan Chaco.

As members of the [Alliance for the Conservation of Rainforests](#) (Alliance), you have committed to reinforcing the synergies and systems in place to combat deforestation, including promoting the crucial role played by indigenous peoples in forest conservation and promoting their traditional knowledge, land use and forest management practices. Many of you are also making a renewed pledge at COP26 to [halt and reverse global deforestation by 2030](#), and are working alongside Paraguay on a voluntary roadmap to be revealed at COP26 on 6 November to reduce commodity-driven deforestation through the [Forest, Agriculture and Commodity Trade \(FACT\) Dialogue](#).

As such, we call on you to urgently raise this issue with the government of Paraguay--a fellow member of the Alliance-- and urge it to ensure the immediate cessation of illegal deforestation and invasions on the *Patrimonio Natural y Cultural Ayoreo Totobiegosode* (PNCAT), a protected indigenous territory.

Through the past decade, the Paraguayan Chaco has been losing forest at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world, mainly through industrial-scale cattle ranching. In June 2021, researchers found that the Chaco stores up to [19 times more carbon](#) than previously thought, and emissions from the Chaco's destruction are comparable to those from the Amazon or Indonesia. The deforestation at PNCAT is a test case of whether the world's governments are serious about tackling this major driver of the climate emergency.

Since the early 1990s, Ayoreo Totobiegosode activists have fought to protect PNCAT from the incursions of cattle ranchers. In 2016, the IACHR granted protective measures to the area, stating that "the communities in voluntary isolation of the Ayoreo Totobiegosode People are in a serious and urgent situation, given that their rights to life and personal integrity are allegedly at risk."

In February 2018, Paraguay's National Forestry Institute (Infona) issued a series of resolutions suspending land use change plans for cattle ranching properties in the area. The suspension of these permits rendered any clearance within the territory unequivocally illegal.

However, as Earthsight reported in its [Grand Theft Chaco](#) publication in 2020, extensive deforestation continued on two properties where Infona had suspended permits.

According to Earthsight's 2020 report, between 22 April 2018 and 30 November 2019, the ranching firm Caucasian SA illegally cleared 2,763 hectares of forest, violating Infona resolution 245/17, and between 30 July and 17 September 2019, an associate of Cooperativa Chortitzer illegally cleared 520 hectares, violating Infona resolution 160/2018.

These substantial criminal acts resulted in the destruction of some of the most sensitive forests in Paraguay that are essential to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation, as recognised by the UN and the IACHR, as well as for the preservation of Totobiegosode history and culture.

Earthsight was able to link hides from PNCAT to an Italian automotive leather giant called Pasubio and on to BMW and Jaguar Land Rover.

One year after the report launched, little has changed as revealed by Earthsight's follow-up investigation [Grand Theft Chaco II](#). PNCAT continues to be the target of illegal invasions and deforestation, Paraguayan authorities have failed to investigate the illegalities highlighted by Earthsight, and the global leather and car industries are still unable to fully trace their leather back to origin and thus disassociate their supply chains from these problems.

Totobiegosode representatives have submitted complaints to public prosecutors denouncing fresh illegal invasions and forest clearances by settlers.

Fresh proof of the continued presence of uncontacted groups in the protected territory concerned surfaced earlier this year. For the first time in many years, the voices of uncontacted Ayoreo were heard by their settled cousins, singing to them at night of their struggles with the continued invasion of their land. Uncontacted Ayoreo are among the most vulnerable people in the world.

Inaction by Paraguayan authorities has led the Ayoreo Totobiegosode to [withdraw](#) in frustration from a dialogue process with the government mediated by the IACHR and meant to result in the titling of the remaining lands requested by the indigenous people in order to form a continuous territory where they can live free of external incursions. This process is still pending and represents a major obstacle to the full realisation of the Ayoreo Totobiegosode's customary land rights.

Deforestation is fuelling both the climate crisis and the collapse of biodiversity across the planet. The preservation of both is a key objective of your Alliance. Having committed to preventing and combating fires and illegal activity as well as facilitating regional and international cooperation, members of the Alliance should urgently address the cases of illegal deforestation and human rights abuses on Ayoreo Totobiegosode lands highlighted in this letter.

As members of the Alliance, we urge you to call on the government of Paraguay to comply with the IACHR's precautionary measures, which include:

- (1) ensuring the immediate cessation of illegal deforestation on Ayoreo Totobiegosode land;**
- (2) creating mechanisms to protect and prevent the entry of third parties into Ayoreo Totobiegosode land;**
- (3) respecting the rights to life, culture and self-determination of the Ayoreo Totobiegosode.**

In addition, the government of Paraguay should:

- (4) speedily finalise the process of formally transferring all requested lands to the Ayoreo Totobiegosode in order to create a continuous territory in which the indigenous people can live according to their customs and traditions in their ancestral territory;**
- (5) investigate all cases of past illegalities – including deforestation and land invasions – exposed by Earthsight and denounced by the Totobiegosode, bring perpetrators to justice, and remedy the negative impacts of such illegal acts.**

The undersigned take the opportunity to emphasise that consumer markets must urgently introduce robust regulations to stamp out their ties to illegal practices, human rights violations, and forest loss overseas. Governments of consumer countries ought to ensure that current legislative initiatives--especially in the EU and UK--are built to have this effect, and that they include leather and other cattle products in these regulations and provide victims of harm linked to products consumed in your jurisdictions with access to justice and rights of redress against responsible operators.

We the undersigned stand ready to assist you and the Paraguayan government in any way we can to support the investigations.

Sincerely,

EAMI Paraguay, Paraguay

Earthsight, United Kingdom

Fern, Belgium

Federación por la Autodeterminación de los Pueblos Indígenas (FAPI), Paraguay

Forest Peoples Programme, United Kingdom and the Netherlands

Mighty Earth, United States

OPIT, Paraguay

Organización Regional de Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía Norte del Perú (ORPIAN – P), Amazonas-Peru

Survival International, United Kingdom