
SALSA Statement Condemning the Murder of Arnaldo Benitez Vargas & Violence against Paî-Tavyterã people in Paraguay

The Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA), an international academic and professional organization comprised of professors, students and researchers, condemns the murder of Arnaldo Benitez Vargas, a religious leader from Yvytyte, one of the most important Paî-Tavyterã communities in northeast Paraguay. On Sunday, October 22, 2023 Arnaldo was beaten and killed by persons working with Indigenous land invaders. This is the most recent tragedy in a campaign of violence being carried out by Paraguayans associated with efforts to drive the Paî-Tavytera from their land, using claims based on a falsified land title.

Guarani lands of eastern Paraguay are threatened by cattle ranching and smuggling operations. In the region of Yvytyte, in the Department of Amambay, the expansion of cattle for the international markets has resulted in massive clearing not just to the borders of the community's land, but onto lands of the Paî-Tavyterã. The invaders have used bulldozers to raze the community's crops and have damaged the school in order to intimidate community members.

Yvytyte is vitally important to the Paî-Tavyterã. It stands beside and protects the rocky outcropping of Jasuka Venda where the Paî recognize they and other Indigenous Peoples originated. *If the invasion of the community were to succeed, it would mean that no Indigenous community in Paraguay would be safe from this kind of land invasion.*

The National Constitution of Paraguay states that Indigenous community lands cannot be divided, transferred, offered in guarantee or rented out (Art. 64 of the Constitution of 1993). Yvytyte has been formally recognized as an Indigenous reserve at least since the early 1980s, when the first Indigenous Census stated that it comprised 11,313 hectares which had been designated as a National Indigenous Community. Subsequently, an area of 6,000 hectares was purchased for the community by the Ministry of Agriculture as a pre-condition for a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank. Even then, only part of that land was titled to the Paî. The rest is pending legalization.

The National Indigenous Census of 2002 recorded 215 families and over a thousand residents, living in 9 villages in the Tekoha Guazú of Yvytyte. Despite the land being legally protected, false land title claims were registered in 2000, with the intention of removing the Indigenous residents of Yvytyte (see attached timeline). Since that time the Paî-Tavyterã have been menaced by threats and violence and by legal machinations in the courts.

The last year has seen a dramatic intensification of the violence. In October of 2022, two Indigenous leaders of the community (Alcides Morilla Romero and Rodrigo Gómez González) were killed, ostensibly in a conflict between the guerilla organization, the *Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo* (EPP) and state security forces. Reports in ABC Color (8/2/23)¹ and on the Cultural Survival website (8/31/2023)² have reported the increase in violence, including beatings, death threats, and gunfire. Despite appeals for help, the National Institute for Indigenous Peoples (INDI) has done little or nothing to support the community, and the press and civil society organizations working to help the community have been threatened and fear for their safety. To date, neither the police nor the army have taken effective measures to defend the Guarani.

We appeal to the international community to support the community of Yvypyte in their ongoing struggle.

See an attached summary and timeline prepared by colleagues doing research in the region. For further information, please contact Richard Reed at Trinity University (rreed@trinity.edu).

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¹<https://www.abc.com.py/internacionales/2023/10/24/piden-investigar-muerte-de-indigena-paraguayo-en-una-zona-aquejada-por-disputas-de-tierras/>

² <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/cultural-survival-calls-solidarity-yvy-pyte-community-pai-tavytera-peoples>