

Region 7 Land Conference Public Statement

Phillipai, March 2, 2017

Over 400 men, women, elders and youth from across Region 7 met in Phillipai on February 28 – March 2, 2017, in a historic gathering. Sixteen villages and communities from Region 7, including the Middle Mazaruni and all of the members of the Upper Mazaruni District Council, as well as representatives from the South Rupununi District Council and the North Pakaraimas District Council met over three days to discuss our land rights, and renewed our commitment to pursuing full territorial rights for our peoples. We have approved the following resolutions as a public statement.

Land issues: The lands we know to be ours from time immemorial have been increasingly invaded by miners and others. This includes customary lands that we depend on for water, food, and forest resources, much of which lie outside our titled lands – but which we have never ceased claiming as ours. Nevertheless, GGMC continues granting concessions on these lands. Over the past three days, we have heard the same story multiple times, and lend our solidarity to communities in the Middle Mazaruni and across the country who face these issues. Specifically, we call attention to:

- Tassarene and Kangaruma: the previous government gave them a title during a public ceremony in 2012, but immediately pulled it away from them. This is disgraceful treatment of two communities who engaged in good faith with the government under the Amerindian Act.
- Omanaik/Kambaru: though its title was granted in 2015, much of its customary land lies outside its title. The GGMC has granted concessions on these lands, however, to mining syndicates, without any consultation. Mining causes pollution of our rivers, destruction of our environment, violence, and social problems. *Because we know these are issues in other communities as well, we demand that the GGMC ceases and desists from granting any concessions in areas slated for extension or on our customary lands.*
- Kaikan: the GGMC is granting mining concessions on lands contiguous with village lands, in violation of article 53 of the Amerindian Act.
- Chinoweing: agreed to demarcation of their lands, being promised that their extension would be fast-tracked. This has not happened, however, and mining concessions continue to be granted on these lands – which include the village's primary farming grounds. We insist the government comply with its promise as well as immediately deliver their certificate of title, which is languishing the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs.

Upper Mazaruni Land Case: we restate our commitment to pursuing our territorial rights through the Upper Mazaruni Court Case, which has been ongoing for almost two decades. We have submitted our evidence and witness testimony, and hope for a prompt resolution of the case.

Amerindian Act: We salute the current government for its publicly stated commitment to revising the Amerindian Act. All of our communities believe the Act must be revised to truly protect our rights. We are willing to work with the Ministry to consult with our communities and contribute to

strengthening and revising the Act in line with international human rights standards. The revision process should involve District Councils, together with the NTC and APA, and should include training on our rights under Guyanese and international law.

Protected areas: Our communities have lived in and protected the forest from time immemorial. Our forests are still standing, despite threats from outsiders. Our communities are at times approached by conservation organizations who are interested in these forests. Until our court case is resolved and our lands are fully recognized, however, we reject any proposals to establish protected areas, and any related research activities in Region 7.

District Councils: We congratulate the South Rupununi District Council for the work they have done, and the recognition they have gained internationally and nationally. We support the strengthening of District Councils across Guyana. Any negotiations regarding large-scale development projects, extractive industry, hydro dams, protected areas, or other issues that affect our territories must seek the free, prior and informed consent of the District Councils. We commit to working in solidarity with District Councils across the country to represent our people in a transparent and democratic manner outside of any party politics or other issues that might divide us. We commit to supporting each other, and to learning from and contributing to each other's efforts to advance our common agenda.

National Tshaos Council (NTC): We call on the NTC to take a strong and informed stand in representing our communities, and to establish appropriate rules and procedures for transparent decision-making. We encourage the NTC to interact with and take into consideration the decisions made by District Councils.

Lands Commission: We have taken note of the GINA press release of 20 February 2017, which states that the proposed lands commission, promised in the President's 'Ten Point Plan' "will address issues of land extension in indigenous communities and ancestral lands in coastal communities". There has been no consultation with the Akawaio and Arekuna peoples about this lands commission or its proposed terms of reference. We insist that such consultation take place prior to the installation of any commission that could affect our land rights. We are adamant that there be no linkage of indigenous land rights and "ancestral lands in coastal communities" - these are distinct issues that should not be mixed – and that extensions and indigenous land rights issues continue to be addressed and expedited by the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs.

Wapichan Land Talks: We the Arekuna and Akawaio were excited to learn about the land talks recently started between the Wapichan and the government of Guyana. They can serve as a model for addressing our land rights. We throw our entire support behind the land talks, and look forward to a successful conclusion that recognizes full Wapichan territorial rights.

Oil & gas: We have heard of the extensive oil and gas discoveries in Guyanese waters, and call for indigenous representation and participation in the planning and benefits from them. We demand that the income from the exploration of these national resources is transparently and wisely invested in the future of our country.

Security issues: Given recent reports of violence and threats in our communities, we call on the Ministry of Public Security to support the establishment of community policing groups. Many of our

people surrendered their firearms in late 2015 following the regulations of the Ministry of Public Security. We are now facing difficulties in hunting and providing for our families. We therefore call on the government to return our firearms with the proper licenses, in a manner that does not incur any further costs.

Finally, we call on our community leaders to continue in the footsteps of the leaders who helped bring the Upper Mazaruni Land Case forward – Anderson Hastings and Czar Henry, who are now gone, and Lawrence Anselmo, who last year was awarded the Golden Arrow for his work defending the rights of indigenous peoples. We feel their presence here, and redouble our commitment to defending our lands for the future of our children. We also acknowledge John Andries, who continues to contribute his expertise in mapping both here and internationally, and will encourage our young people to pick up and build on the skills he and others so generously offer.