



Federación por la  
Autodeterminación  
de los Pueblos Indígenas



28 January 2021

## Open Letter: Call for Paraguayan authorities to investigate cases of illegal deforestation in Alto Paraguay

*An open letter to the Paraguayan National Commission for the Defense of Natural Resources (Conaderna), Ministry of Environment (Mades), and National Forestry Institute (Infona).*

We the undersigned NGOs and indigenous rights organisations are joined by a Member of the European Parliament who is a Delegate to the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly in expressing our deep concern at the illegal destruction of forest and invasion of indigenous land in Paraguay.

We call on the government to investigate findings from a 30 September 2020 Earthsight report that detailed cases of illegal deforestation by cattle ranching firms in the country's western Chaco region. These illegal clearances occurred within the recognised territory of the Ayoreo Totobiegosode, where forests are home to the last isolated indigenous peoples living anywhere in the Americas outside the Amazon rainforest.

Since the early 1990s, Totobiegosode activists have fought to protect this territory from the incursions of cattle ranching firms. In 2016, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) granted protective measures to the area. In February 2018, Paraguay's National Forestry Institute (Infona) followed suit, issuing 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's report demonstrates, extensive deforestation continued on two properties where Infona had suspended permits.

Between 22 April 2018 and 30 November 2019, the ranching firm Caucasian SA illegally cleared 2763 hectares of forest, violating Infona resolution 245/17. Between 30 July and 17 September 2019, an associate of Chortitzer illegally cleared 520 hectares, violating Infona resolution 160/2018.

Satellite images showing this deforestation, and the dates on which it occurred, are included in Earthsight's report, and are understood to be available to Infona and any Paraguayan government agency. The resulting cleared ground was documented using drone footage of

the ranches themselves, with permission to fly drones granted by members of a local Totobiegosode community.

Taken together, this represents 3283 hectares of illegal clearance of some of the most sensitive forest in Paraguay. This is around a quarter of the total surface area of Asunción, and almost 10 per cent of the total annual illegal deforestation estimated by Infona. These substantial criminal acts resulted in the destruction of forest that is essential for the livelihoods of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation, as recognised by international human rights observers including the UN and the IACHR, as well as for the preservation of Totobiegosode history and culture, with roots that stretch back far beyond the Spanish conquest.

Despite the gravity of these findings, Paraguayan authorities have neither responded to the evidence presented in Earthsight's report, nor are understood to have launched an investigation. We therefore urge the government of Paraguay to do the following:

- Investigate the case of illegal deforestation against Caucasian SA which occurred between 22 April 2018 and 30 November 2019;
- Investigate the case of illegal deforestation within the Chortitzer ranch which occurred between 30 July and 17 September 2019;
- Investigate whether the 200-plus fires which occurred at Caucasian SA during 2020 in areas cleared illegally since February 2018 (as detailed in Earthsight findings published on 21 October 2020) were in breach of Law 4104;

Deforestation is fuelling both the climate crisis and the collapse of biodiversity across the planet. Forest clearance for commodity production is also frequently associated with grave human rights abuses against indigenous peoples and forest dependent communities. 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 and other agribusiness activities. The demand for this beef and leather comes principally from international markets.

This year, the European Union has finally committed to introducing legislation to halt the flow of forest-risk commodities produced as a result of deforestation.

In order to demonstrate its commitment to aligning its commodity production practices with the environmentally sustainable trade framework that major markets such as the EU are set to establish, the Paraguayan government must act on illegalities such as those outlined above.

Stamping out such impunity is also a critical step towards tackling the wider environmental and human rights abuses associated with agribusiness and land ownership in the country.

For the Paraguayan Chaco to continue to thrive as a reserve of biodiversity, to persist as a provider of natural services, and to remain a refuge for indigenous communities, there cannot be impunity for environmental crimes and human rights abuse. Action must be taken now.

We the undersigned stand ready to assist in any way we can to support this investigation. For your reference, the full results of Earthsight's September 2020 investigation can be accessed [here](#) and the October 2020 findings read [here](#). The location and legal status of the Totobigeosode land claim is covered both in the report and on the *Tierras Indigenas* online resource [here](#).

Signed by:

Earthsight [www.earthsight.org.uk](http://www.earthsight.org.uk)

Federación por la Autodeterminación de los Pueblos Indígenas (FAPI) [www.fapi.org.py](http://www.fapi.org.py)

Fern [www.fern.org](http://www.fern.org)

Forest Peoples Programme [www.forestpeoples.org](http://www.forestpeoples.org)

Iniciativa Amotocodie <https://www.iniciativa-amotocodie.org/>

MEP for the Greens/EFA in the European Parliament, Anna Cavazzini [www.annacavazzini.eu](http://www.annacavazzini.eu)

Organización Payipie Ichadie Totobiegosode (OPIT)

Survival International [www.survivalinternational.org](http://www.survivalinternational.org)