

Screw indigenous people: LET'S STOP GLOBAL WARMING!

David Hill is a researcher for Survival International and the author of a recent report on the devastation being wrought on tribal groups in the name of tackling climate change. Here he argues that such mitigation measures must not be used as an excuse to dispossess indigenous peoples of their lands and livelihoods

Two years ago, while walking in west London, an advertising billboard caught my eye. Pictured was a man dressed in a dark suit and red tie with a big, cheesy grin on his face. The billboard read, in big capital letters, 'Screw global warming: let's fly!'

That billboard came to mind when I began researching how attempts to stop climate change are affecting the world's indigenous people. Another, equally ironic billboard might read: 'Screw indigenous people: let's stop global warming!'

This is no exaggeration. Attempts to stop climate change are ignoring indigenous peoples' rights, driving them from their land, and destroying it – just like global warming itself. This is what Survival International calls the 'most inconvenient truth of all'.

Let me give you two examples. In Borneo, 10,000 people have been forced from their homes to make way for dams to produce hydroelectric power (HEP). HEP is being promoted by Malaysian officials as a 'clean', 'friendly' alternative to fossil fuels.

The biggest dam 'is very much in line with the objective of reducing

and containing global warming,' says Malaysia's prime minister's office. 'It serves as the country's positive contribution to the protection of the global environment.'

But how friendly is it when 10,000 people lose their homes, land and livelihoods? How clean is it when some of these people, including members of the hunter-gatherer Penan tribe, now can't hunt or gather and barely survive among patches of rubble?

My colleague Miriam Ross recently met some of the Penan who have been evicted to make way for the dam. 'Living here is very painful,' a man called Deling told her. 'Normally, we would eat three times a day, but here it's very difficult. Once a day.'

'It is very difficult for us here,' Miriam was told by a woman called Livan. 'We can't survive by farming the same land over and over again. In the old place, there were always fish in the river and boar in the forest. Easy to hunt.'

For the Guarani in Brazil, the situation is even more desperate. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is promoting biofuels as a 'green' alternative to fossil fuels and pushing the



Guarani off their ancestral land in order to grow sugar cane to be converted into ethanol.

'Biofuels are an effective weapon in the fight against global warming,' Lula told a summit last year. Having proposed to ban sugar cane in the Amazon, Brazil's environment minister claimed that Brazilian ethanol made from sugar cane would be '100 per cent green'.

The Guarani, who don't live in the Amazon Basin, have already lost much of their land to sugar cane plantations and cattle ranchers, to catastrophic effect. Many are now camped by roadsides or on tiny parcels of land surrounded by field of cane. 'The big sugar cane plantations are now occupying our land,' said Guarani leader Amilton Lopez during a recent tour of Europe.

of our environment have contributed to the destruction of our once-beautiful forests,' he said. 'No agenda is as important to the country today as that of climate change.'

Kenya's government has repeatedly tried to evict the Ogiek in the past, using the claim that they are destroying the forest as justification. This latest attempt has now been dressed up as an initiative to combat global warming.

'Everyone has been living in fear,' said one of the Ogiek leaders, Kiplangat Cheruyot, after the government made its announcement. 'People are crying about the eviction. The government said it would spare no-one. The Ogiek have nowhere else to go.'

People in Peru, where the president, Alan Garcia, has struck a deal with Lula,

does he mention that the government has not consulted, let alone obtained the consent of, those people.

In December last year, just before the UN climate talks in Copenhagen, I met an Asháninka man from one of the villages that would be flooded by one of the dams. Javier Dril Bustamente, who lives beside the River Ene, said that local people's feelings against the dam were very strong. Had anyone from the government talked to the Asháninka about it? Absolutely not. Did he think the Asháninka would allow the dam to be built? Ditto.

'The government plans to exterminate us,' one Asháninka organisation, CARE, has said, calling Garcia and Lula's plan 'outrageous'. 'We will not allow onto our land any organisation

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How 'effective' is a measure that has meant at least 80 children dying from starvation?

'Sugar cane is polluting our rivers and killing our fish. [It is increasing] suicides, alcoholism and murder.'

How can Brazilian ethanol be 'green' if it destroys the lives of thousands of people? How 'effective' is any measure that has meant, in the past seven years, at least 80 children dying from starvation?

Over in Africa, an equally bleak future awaits the Ogiek tribe if the Kenyan government gets its way. Kenya has launched an international appeal to save the Mau forest, the largest block of montane forest in East Africa, and has told its traditional inhabitants, the Ogiek, to get out.

In its appeal to save the forest, Kenya is citing climate change as a key motivation. Kenya's prime minister recently told the UN that his government was acting to 'reverse the ravages' of global warming and highlighted its efforts to save the Mau as an example. 'Years of rampant excess in the mismanagement

may also be affected. The presidents' plan is to build a series of dams on Peruvian territory, mainly to supply HEP to Brazil. Once again, this means playing the global warming card. HEP has a key role in Brazil's National Plan on Climate Change, and President Garcia has also been touting the dams' 'clean' credentials.

One of the Brazilian plan's main objectives is to 'keep the high share of renewable energy in the electric matrix. Growing demand and the prospect of the long-term exhaustion of hydroelectric potential... require other sources to be part of this expansion.'

That's where Peru comes in. Late last year, Garcia revealed his vision of Peru as 'assuming the role of a great provider of "blue" [HEP] energy and renewable energy' – not just to Brazil, but 'the whole South American continent'.

Garcia doesn't mention that the dams would flood thousands of hectares of land that supports thousands of people, such as the Asháninka. Nor

working on this project.'

The Asháninka's anger isn't difficult to understand. The proposed dam would create an enormous reservoir and flood their houses, some of their prime hunting areas, and some of their most fertile cropland.

Of course, drawing attention to the potential negative impacts of climate change mitigation on indigenous people isn't to say that we shouldn't take action. We must. But that action must not be at the expense of indigenous peoples' rights and lives.

If this doesn't happen, there's a very real risk that climate change will be hijacked and converted into yet another justification for stealing land from indigenous people. It's not for nothing that some people have expressed concern about 'CO₂lonialism'.

For more on these issues, and to read Survival International's report, visit www.survivalinternational.org