

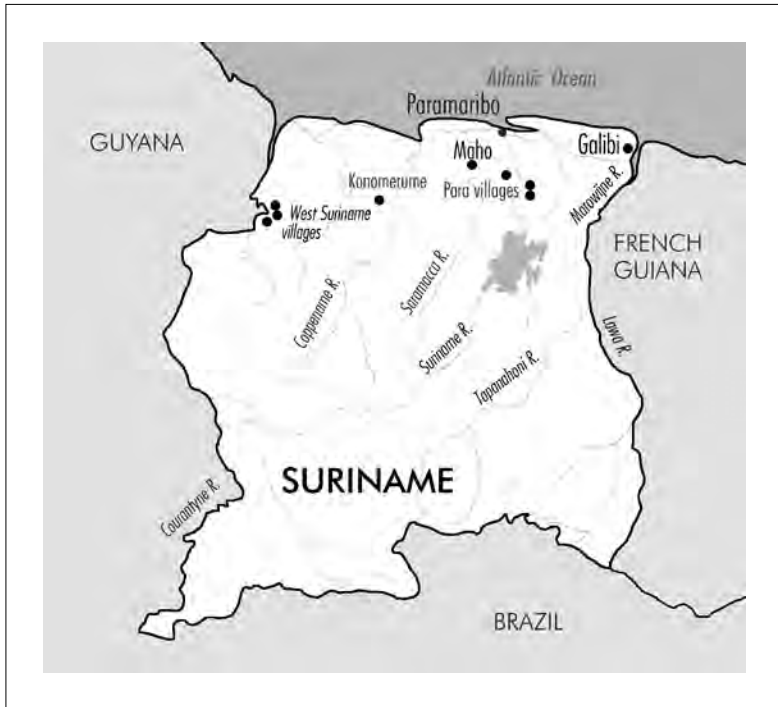
# SURINAME

Indigenous peoples in Suriname number 18,200 people, or approximately 3.7% of the total population of 492,000<sup>1</sup> (census 2004/2007), while an additional 2-3,000 live in neighbouring French Guiana after fleeing the “Interior War” in the late 1980s. The four most numerous peoples are the Kali’ña (Caribs), Lokono (Arawaks), Trio (Tirio, Tareno) and Wayana. In addition, there are small settlements of other Amazonian indigenous peoples in the south-west and south of Suriname, including the Akurio, Wai-Wai, Katuena/Tunayana, Mawayana, Pireuyana, Sikiyana, Okomoyana, Alamayana, Maraso, Sirewu and Sakëta. The Kali’ña and Lokono live mainly in the northern part of the country and are sometimes referred to as “lowland” indigenous peoples, whereas the Trio, Wayana and other Amazonian peoples live in the south and are referred to as “highland” peoples.

The legislative system of Suriname, based on colonial legislation, does not recognize indigenous or tribal peoples. Suriname is the only country in the Western Hemisphere without any legislation on indigenous peoples’ land and other rights. This forms a major threat to the survival and well-being and respect for the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, particularly with the rapidly increasing focus that is being placed on Suriname’s many natural resources (including bauxite, gold, water, forests and biodiversity).

## Political developments

**T**he year 2010 was dominated by the national elections for a new National Assembly (Parliament) which, in turn, elects the President as head of government. Both the process leading up to the elections and the outcome are significant for the indigenous peoples of Suriname.



Suriname has a semi-presidential political system in which the President and Vice-President are not elected directly through national elections but by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly, consisting of 51 elected representatives from the ten administrative districts of Suriname. If a candidate is not elected in two rounds, the poll goes to a simple majority vote of the *Verenigde Volksvergadering* (VVV; “United People’s Assembly”), which consists of all elected representatives at national, district and municipal level, 919 persons in total. This electoral system means that coalitions have to be formed among like-minded political parties in order to secure the election of their presidential candidate in the National Assembly and with that, participation in the government, since it is the President who selects and appoints members of the Cabinet of Ministers.

The political participation of indigenous peoples in Suriname has historically been marginal, and mainly through the major political parties, under whose “discipline” and policies indigenous candidates (if any at all) fall. Proper indigenous

peoples' political parties have until now not been able to gain seats on their own or participate in a government coalition. Having analyzed this situation, the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Suriname (VIDS, *Vereniging van Inheemse Dorpshoofden in Suriname*) decided to appoint a commission to talk to political parties about their policy intentions and political programmes, and about indigenous participation in the government, should that party get elected. Two indigenous village leaders ran for the position of district representative, in the districts of Marowijne and Para respectively, one of whom is a member of the Board of VIDS and the other a member of the Board of KLIM, a regional subsidiary of VIDS. Both got elected. For the first time in the political history of Suriname, two indigenous chiefs have hence been elected simultaneously to the Parliament, both for the NDP (National Democratic Party) political party, which won the elections (previously the largest opposition party). They were sworn in through a traditional indigenous ceremony in the National Assembly, also unique in Suriname's history.

The new government was installed in September 2010. Although electoral promises with regard to participation in government have not yet been fulfilled, there is still an expectation that, through the presence of these two indigenous representatives in the National Assembly and more frequent direct dialogue with the government, more influence will now be exerted on government policies in Suriname. The new President of the Republic, Mr. Desire Bouterse, has promised to introduce affirmative action for indigenous peoples and settle the land rights' issue.

International support for the indigenous peoples' struggle in Suriname was substantially less in 2010, particularly following the electoral victory of the NDP, which is not on particularly friendly terms with the Netherlands, a country which until 2010 was a major donor of development assistance to Suriname. No new official development assistance is expected from the Netherlands, and various non-governmental organisations that functioned as "co-financing organisations" of the Dutch government have also stopped supporting civil society organisations in Suriname. This situation is likely to have an impact on the struggle for legal recognition of indigenous peoples' rights in Suriname.

### **Adherence to international standards**

Notwithstanding the change in political climate, the strategy of demanding recognition of indigenous peoples' rights by making use of regional and international

justice systems has not been abandoned. The new government is trying to accelerate the implementation of the judgement of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in the Saramaka case,<sup>2</sup> which had a deadline of mid-December 2010. This judgement obliges Suriname to adopt national legislation and standards to demarcate and legally recognize the collective ownership of the Saramaka Maroon people over their traditional tribal lands, and to respect their right to free, prior and informed consent. Such recognition would obviously have repercussions for all Indigenous and Maroon peoples in Suriname and, in the talks with the new government on its implementation, VIDS is participating alongside the VSG (*Vereniging van Saramaccaanse Gezagsdraggers*, Association of Saramaccan Traditional Authorities). The support of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Mr. James Anaya, has meanwhile been formally requested by the government in the process of drafting legislation on indigenous and tribal peoples' rights in Suriname.

It is yet to be seen whether the new government will indeed pursue national legislation and policies in favour of, and in accordance with international standards on, indigenous peoples' rights. Until now, policy intentions related to mining, infrastructure and decentralization, for example, have not shown an improved understanding of or respect for indigenous peoples' rights. Indigenous and tribal Maroon peoples' rights are not yet legally recognized in Suriname. In the absence of such legal protection, the announced plans to intensify mining operations in south Suriname, along with the construction of a trans-Amazonian road from Paramaribo to Brazil, new hydroelectric works in south-east and south-west Suriname and a proposal for the incorporation of traditional indigenous and tribal authorities into regional governmental structures may all form vital threats to Indigenous and Maroon peoples in Suriname.

A complaint of human rights' violations by the State of Suriname against the indigenous Maho community was submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2010. This community has been suffering violations of its ancestral land rights due to the issuing of land titles and concessions to third parties by the (previous) government, and even the destruction of their crops by those third parties. Since there is no national legislation on indigenous peoples' land rights, the community had no other choice than to seek justice from the regional human rights body. When these violations showed no sign of stopping, the Commission issued precautionary measures against Suriname in December 2010.<sup>3</sup> A decision on another case against the State of Suriname, submitted in

2007 by eight indigenous communities in East Suriname and VIDS for similar infringements, is expected in 2011.

### Development initiatives

In 2010, VIDS' introduction of bilingual intercultural education in primary school mathematics was extended to another indigenous community, Konomerume (Donderkamp), in addition to Galibi where this education had already been piloted the year before. The results of this pilot project, in which the children are taught mathematics in their own native language with visual materials from their own surroundings, will be monitored over a three-year period to compare their school results with those of children who are taught in Dutch, the official language of Suriname, which is not spoken widely in the interior of the country.

Another initiative that has raised high expectations is that of supporting indigenous women in two regions of West and Central (Para area) Suriname, to establish their own small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Indigenous women from various regions of Suriname have also been participating in a series of Caribbean meetings of indigenous women, which may soon result in the establishment of a Caribbean network of indigenous women.

Galibi, East Suriname, was the venue of a trans-boundary meeting of indigenous peoples from Suriname, French Guiana and northern Brazil, organized by VIDS Suriname and Iepé Brazil. This meeting discussed issues related to the continuing gold mining and its detrimental impacts on indigenous communities in all countries on the Guyana Shield, social issues affecting indigenous peoples and the land rights' issue. The similarity and solidarity between the indigenous peoples of the region were striking, and it was decided to continue this exchange and networking. The conference also adopted a strong declaration against the impacts of gold mining on indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup> ○

### Notes and references

- 1 The population is ethnically and religiously highly diverse, consisting of Hindustani (27.4%), Creoles (17.7%), Maroons ("Bush negroes", 14.7%), Javanese (14.6%), mixed (12.5%), indigenous peoples ("Amerindians", 3.7%) and Chinese (1.8%). At least 15 different languages are spoken

on a daily basis in Suriname but the official language is Dutch, while the *lingua franca* used in informal conversations is *Sranan Tongo* (Surinamese).

2 [http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec\\_172\\_ing.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_172_ing.pdf)

3 <http://www.cidh.oas.org/medidas/2010.en.htm>

4 <http://www.institutoiepe.org.br/noticias/47-eventos/167-problematICA-do-garimpo-e-discutida-por-povos-indigenas-do-brasil-guiana-francesa-e-suriname.html>

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