

NATIVE NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

Poverty, Disease, Oil Exploration and Logging Drive Warao Indians to Venezuela's Cities

■ Indigenous people in South America are in need; their lives are changing.

CARACAS, VENEZUELA (AP)—Alquino Rivero's six children are growing up barefoot in a dirty city park. His wife begs and sells jewelry.

Fellow Warao Indians live among foul mattresses, broken toys and food scraps.

Yet Rivero said life is better here than in his ancestral homeland of eastern Venezuela's Orinoco Delta, where activists say hunger, disease, logging and oil projects have driven thousands to head for the cities.

Warao Indians began leaving Delta Amacuro State, where most of the estimated 30,000 Warao live, decades ago. But the trickle has become a flood.

"What we're seeing, unfortunately, is a microcosm of what's happening around the world, where the majority of the last large remaining oil reserves are in low-income or indigenous communities," said Michael Brun, an environmentalist with the Los Angeles-based Rainforest Action Network.

Others are reluctant to blame only big oil.

"We can't say that oil exploration is what is making the Warao migrate," said Rosa Trujillo, a Congressional Aide on Indian affairs. "Industry brings a new model of thought (to indigenous peoples), which is based on a society of consumption."

Indian leaders agree, saying Warao often are prompted to head to cities when fellow Indians come home with fistfuls of cash. Activists estimate 2,000 to 7,000 Warao are in constant migration to and from the cities.

"Warao" means "canoe people" in

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—Alquino Rivero



www.warao.org

the Warao language and "Delta Amacuro" means, "quilt of water." Rivero, 41, grew up in a typical Warao village in the heart of the delta, dotted with thatch homes built on stilts.

Warao fish in a labyrinth of small rivers and tributaries that form the Switzerland-sized delta. From moriche palms, they extract flour and wine and weave baskets and hammocks.

But it's been years since Rivero cast a fishing net into the dark, fast-flowing Orinoco. His life consists of traveling back and forth between Caracas and his village, 400 miles away. He stays in the capital until he saves up about 200,000 bolivars, or about \$270, which is enough money to feed his family for a few months.

"We don't have work to pay for clothes, food, soap. If we had jobs we wouldn't live like this," Rivero said as he sat on a cot with one of his sons on his lap. "The government says it will help, but I don't know when."

The remote Orinoco Delta has long suffered industrial exploitation and government neglect. Logging has shrunk its forests and demand for palm hearts is depleting the moriche palms.

More than 90 percent of Warao communities are hundreds of miles

from a hospital. More than 70 percent lack schools, telephones or roads.

At least 50 percent of Warao children suffer from tuberculosis or diarrhea caused in part by river pollution. Most of the state lacks potable water.

Environmentalists say the surge in Warao migration began after the government's decision in 1996 to open Venezuela's oil industry to foreign investment. Exploratory drilling began; forest plots were cleared; some fish-bearing river flows were interrupted.

But Indian rights activists say oil exploration has been too small to explain the migration. They note BP Amoco abandoned its three delta exploration projects last year, although environmentalists accuse the company of leaving behind buried toxic waste.

The state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela, which took over BP's two other projects, did not return calls seeking comment.

Rep. Noheli Pocaterra, a Wayuu Indian, and other Indian lawmakers are drawing up a plan to develop agriculture and fishing in the delta, bring doctors in, install a sewage system and encourage Warao to become involved in politics.

For the first time, a Warao is the mayor of the Antonio Diaz district

of Delta Amacuro, where 70 percent of Warao live. But Pocaterra acknowledges it could take years to reverse the migration trend.

"I've received reports that things are the same: hunger, disease," President Hugo Chavez said in a recent speech. "There is a group of aboriginal people that come here ... I've asked Noheli to help us convince them to return but we have to accompany that by projects, programs to allow them to develop their own land."

While downtown Caracas has its share of unlicensed street vendors and homeless, the sight of Warao families living on the streets has been unnerving for many "Caraqueños."

Indians had been rare in urban areas of Venezuela, unlike some South American countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia where Indians make up almost half the population. Indians represent only three percent of Venezuela's 24 million people and largely live in the delta, the southern Amazon and the northern desert frontier with Colombia.

In Paseo Vargas Park, Indian women give birth on soiled mattresses, cook over open fires and hang beaded necklaces from tree branches in hopes of attracting sales from passers-by. Children play, sleep and defecate among the trees. Most residents hurry past, shaking their heads.

Culture shock, hardship and heartbreak aren't enough to get Rivero to abandon the capital's smoggy streets and return home.

"People die there," he said. "I don't want to go back."

Nakoda Freelance Photographer Will Call Oregon Home For Now

■ A rookie to *Smoke Signals*, Peta Tinda brings wealth of experience.

By Justin Phillips

Fort Peck Tribal member Peta Tinda is the latest rookie to be added to the award winning *Smoke Signals* team and he brings a talent to the job. Tinda is freelancing as a photojournalist for the Tribal newspaper.

Born and raised on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana, Tinda comes from a family of journalism.

His mom, Minnie Two-Shoes and his three aunts all work for their Tribal newspaper.

Tinda said one of his biggest influences has been his mother.

Wotani Wowapi - the paper's name is in Lakota language. *Wotani* meaning, "pay attention, or listen here," and *Wowapi* meaning "book or paper."

Tinda's great-uncle was once the Vice-Chair of the Fort Peck Tribe. His uncle was also the Tribal Chair of his Tribe.



"Working It" — Peta Tinda cruises the Craps & Chrome Auto Show.

Photo by Brent Merrill

Tinda has been an avid photojournalist in the past years. In 2000, he took first place in the Native American Journalist Association's (NAJA) photo shootout in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Tinda now lives in Salem where he will be attending school at Western Oregon University in Monmouth.

"Right now I'm studying history," said Tinda. "I also studied journalism at Montana State University."

Tinda has worked for the Associated Press, done several internships and has a lot of experience in mainstream media, but enjoys working in Indian Country.

Tinda said he enjoys reading, snowboarding, Japanese anime and of course photography.

"I love my job," said Tinda. "I wouldn't rather be doing anything else. I believe that keeping people informed — about things that affect them — is one of the most important jobs there is."