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Peruvian Officials Deny Claims About Threats to Murunahua Reserve

By [David Dudenhoefer](#) June 3, 2011

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By Chris Fagan/Upper Amazon Conservancy

Illegal logging settlement inside the Murunahua Reserve for uncontacted tribes, south-east Peru.

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Peruvian officials this week denied claims by the British organization Survival International that the government plans to abolish the Murunahua Territorial Reserve, created in 1997 to protect almost 1.2 million acres (482,000 hectares) of Amazon wilderness that is home to uncontacted groups of Murunahua and other Native peoples.

In a June 1 [press release](#), Survival International claims that the Peruvian government plans to abolish the Murunahua Reserve, which abuts the Peru-Brazil border near a community of uncontacted Indians in Brazil that was filmed from the air by the BBC for a [documentary](#) released earlier this year. The Amazon lowlands of eastern Peru are home to an estimated 14 tribes with some, or all of their people living in voluntary isolation, who are commonly called “uncontacted” or “isolated” peoples. They face growing threats from loggers, miners and the oil industry.

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“We have in no way even considered abolishing the Murunahua Reserve,” said José Carlos Vilcapoma, Peru’s Vice-Minister for Interculturality, who oversees the country’s Indian affairs department, INDEPA. “(The press release) is absolutely false.”

The Survival International press release lacks reference to specific statements by Peruvian officials. Rebecca Spooner, who runs the group’s Latin America campaign, explained that it is based on information from Peruvian organizations that work with Peru’s Amazonian Natives. Anonymous sources claim that INDEPA officials have cast doubt on the existence of uncontacted groups within the Murunahua Reserve during meetings, and have suggested that its legal status should therefore be modified.



Recently-contacted Murunahua man, south-east Peru. The Murunahua’s reserve is occupied by illegal loggers.

Vilcapoma said that Survival International lacks credibility because it has failed to provide his office with proof to back up past claims of threats to uncontacted peoples in Peru. He explained the INDEPA is working with other government agencies and non-government organizations to improve protection of Murunahua and the other four territorial reserves that Peru has created to protect uncontacted Natives in the country’s Amazon region. But he admitted that INDEPA has no personnel in the Murunahua Reserve, due to budgetary constraints, and instead relies on the Environment Ministry to protect it.

Chris Fagan, executive director of the [Upper Amazon Conservancy](#), has flown over the Murunahua Reserve repeatedly in recent years and produced reports documenting the presence of illegal logging camps inside it, which he has delivered to INDEPA. He said his organization has offered to fly INDEPA officials into the area to see those camps and cover the cost of working with the Peruvian Navy and police to evict them, but they always decline the offer.

“INDEPA is just not interested in dealing with this. They’ve stalled, and stalled,” said Fagan.

Vilcapoma said the Forestry Directorate is responsible for regulating logging and has a control post downriver from the Murunahua Reserve. But Fagan said that he passed by that post in April, and there were no Forestry Directorate officials there. It was being used as a camp by loggers whose rafts loaded with logs were moored along the riverbank. Fagan said he also visited a logging camp on the border of the Murunahua reserve in April that had a network of roads, bulldozers and massive mahogany logs waiting to be floated to port, and was totally illegal.

In March, Survival International distributed [information](#) about a 2006 U.S. embassy cable released by Wikileaks stating that 70 percent -90 percent of Peru’s mahogany exports were illegal. Peru’s Environment Minister, Antonio Brack, [responded](#) by stating the government has significantly improved enforcement since 2006. But Fagan says his experience in the field contradicts that assertion. He said the unwillingness of government officials in Lima to stop the mahogany trade and weak protection of national parks and indigenous territories on the ground have created a dangerous situation for uncontacted peoples.



An illegal logging camp in an uncontacted tribes’ reserve in south-east Peru.

According to the anthropologist Beatriz Huertas, who has worked in the region sporadically since 1993, the Murunahua Reserve has never been effectively policed and loggers have been illegally extracting mahogany from it since it was created. She has interviewed Natives who live near the reserve who have told her about the murders of Murunahua and other uncontacted Indians, including a massacre in 2003 that claimed somewhere between 10 and 30 lives.

“I spoke with a Chitonahua woman in 2008 who told me the names of loggers who had entered the reserve and killed people. She said that it is common for loggers to kill isolated people,” Huertas said. “I

work in the field and I know what the situation is like. They can’t tell me that it isn’t true that the fundamental rights of isolated peoples are being violated.”

Huertas explained that this problem is not limited to Murunahua; it affects the country’s other territorial reserves and uncontacted tribes living in areas that lack protected status. Nongovernmental organizations have proposed the creation of five more territorial reserves in regions where they have detected Natives living in voluntary isolation, but INDEPA has failed to convene a meeting of the committee that needs to act on such proposals for years.

Because Peruvians will elect a new president this Sunday, the fate of those tribes will soon be in the hands of a new government. Vilcapoma noted that neither candidate has mentioned this issue in

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their campaign, which indicates that the issue is a low priority for voters. He explained that INDEPA is consequently planning a press conference and other activities to raise awareness about the Peru's uncontacted peoples in the coming months.

"It is very easy to criticize from the outside, but it's a lot harder to deal with this issue from inside the government," he said.

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