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PRESS RELEASE:

New Report Highlights Threats to the Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Guyana and Calls for Reforms

Georgetown, 16 December: A new study launched today by the Amerindian Peoples Association (APA) provides detailed evidence of land rights violations and land conflicts affecting indigenous peoples in Regions 1 and 2 in Guyana.

The report takes a close look at the land rights situation of 35 indigenous villages and communities in Region 1 and seven villages in Region 2. It finds almost one third of the communities have no legally secured land rights. It also finds that out of 29 titled Amerindian Villages visited, only one community considers its existing land title description to be adequate for its residents. Two thirds of titled villages highlight that settlements and homesteads are also left outside their title. The report sets out a series of grassroots proposals for action to address indigenous peoples' land claims and grievances with specific recommendations for Village Councils and the National Toshias Council, the government of Guyana and international agencies.

"This report contains important information on all the communities visited, and includes testimonies from women, elders and youths about the land and what it means to us," said APA President, Mario Hastings during his presentation at the report launch. He added that evidence also suggests that the Shell Beach Protected Area directly affects the land rights of several communities near or inside the park itself.

In 2011, the APA was tasked by its members to conduct a participatory study on the land rights situation facing indigenous communities. The aim was to help Village Councils advance their land claims and to provide information for national projects and initiatives that address indigenous peoples' lands and forests.

The report finds that weak land governance and flawed boundary survey practices along with discriminatory national laws on land and resource ownership often prevent satisfactory and fair land titling for indigenous communities. Evidence presented in the study shows how the extractive sector contributes to violations of customary land rights of indigenous peoples. In 2015, over 30 per cent of titled villages and 80 per cent of untitled customary lands were found to have mining concessions

imposed on them. Similar data emerged for forestry activities with 34 per cent of titled villages and 79 per cent of untitled lands being affected by State Forest Permits or other logging concessions. These concessions were allocated without the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the indigenous communities living in the settlements. The granting of logging and mining blocks on community lands has led to conflict between the parties involved and human rights abuses. In some cases like Baramita Village in Region 1, reported violations include sexual crimes against Amerindian women and minors.

The report further highlights that mining and logging allocations done without FPIC resulted in destructive mining and logging practices causing heavy contamination and pollution of waters, heavy degradation of river banks and forests resulting in water shortages, food insecurity and health problems. Some of the more seriously affected communities are Baramita, Eclipse Falls, Arakaka, Big Creek, Oronoque, Citrus Grove and Canal Bank.

Sharon Atkinson, a resident of Santa Rosa Village and a lead field researcher in the land study, said “The villages and communities in the region are pleased about the study’s release. They have expressed appreciation for APA’s continuing work on the rights of indigenous peoples and the land issue.” She added “When we say land we don’t mean the surface alone. We mean everything above and beneath it from the flora and the fauna that depend on it. For indigenous people land is life.”

In its recommendations, the report proposes that the government and authorities move towards reviewing and amending the 2006 Amerindian Act so that it will align with articles in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and related international human rights treaties to which Guyana is a signatory. Additionally, it recommends that an independent national tribunal to address indigenous peoples’ grievances and concerns to territorial claims be established. The report also emphasises the pressing need to suspend destructive mining and logging operations which directly impact communities, especially in places where FPIC has not been respected.

Other recommendations include the need to reform the country’s land titling and demarcation rules so that FPIC is clearly applied; recognise and include skilled indigenous mappers and traditional knowledge holders in boundary surveys; and ensure the Amerindian Land Titling (ALT) Project, currently being implemented by the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs and UNDP, upholds indigenous peoples’ rights, while establishing FPIC and consultative mechanisms with indigenous peoples to guarantee it is working properly. The APA welcomes the intentions of the government to address some of these issues including the revision of the Amerindian Act and the development of a grievance mechanism, the latter to deal specifically with indigenous peoples’ lands.

In its concluding analysis, the report commended the current administration’s Hinterland Indigenous Peoples Commission for providing a potentially valuable medium for indigenous communities to engage with and resolve issues of land titling and demarcation. However, it stresses that Guyana’s push for legislative reform must protect the collective legal rights of indigenous peoples on customary territorial lands and provide for effective land restitution.

Further information: The land tenure report is based on a participatory study and field visits conducted during 2012-2015 by a trained local research team that used the Report of the Amerindian Lands Commission of 1969 as a baseline alongside other government and community documents in conjunction with direct testimonies, oral history and local accounts of land issues and conflicts provided by community residents and elders. The results are set out in the publication *'Our Land, Our Life: A participatory assessment of the land tenure situation of indigenous peoples in Guyana*, which is jointly published by the APA and the UK non-governmental organization Forest Peoples Programme (FPP). The work has been supported with international funds provided by UKAid and the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (Norad). [The full report can be accessed here](#) and on apaguyana.com

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