



## Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the U.S.

**FACT SHEET: CELEBRATING 500 YEARS OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE**

While November is Native American Heritage Month in the U.S., the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela celebrates one month earlier on October 12th, which is known as the Day of Indigenous Resistance. Each year on this day, the country pays tribute to the struggles of native peoples against the brutalities of colonialism. It was established in 2002 and has since been integrated into public school curriculums, and is emblematic of the many ways in which the status of indigenous peoples in Venezuela has been elevated under the Bolivarian Revolution. The current government has established legal and institutional mechanisms to guarantee respect for indigenous rights and funded social programs to provide resources for development and boost the wellbeing of indigenous peoples throughout the country. Now more than ever, indigenous communities are seen as key protagonists in Venezuela's past, present and future.



Venezuela's indigenous population is very diverse and comprised of about 34 different ethnic groups, the largest of these being the Wayuu (largely concentrated in the northwestern part of the country), the Warao (in the northeast), and the Pemón (in the southeast). The last national census in 2001 found that there are 532,783 indigenous people in Venezuela, an amount equal to about 2.3 percent of the population. However, the numbers may be higher; a new census that will conclude on November 30, 2011, is expected to garner more accurate data. This census includes a separate questionnaire designed by the National Institute of Statistics in consultation with indigenous groups to gather information useful for designing government policies that promote development and political participation among this historically marginalized sector.

### Legal and Institutional Progress

Until the very end of the 20th century, Venezuela's constitutions excluded or discriminated against indigenous peoples, reflecting the power structures inherited from colonialism. This shameful past was relegated to history with the 1999 constitution, which marked the first step in the process of dignifying the nation's original inhabitants, providing them with essential legal and institutional guarantees to allow them to exercise their rights. Here are some of the main achievements in this arena:

In 1999, Venezuelan citizens voted in a national referendum to enact a new constitution, drafted in consultation with the public, which includes an entire chapter on indigenous peoples. According to the constitution: "The State recognizes the existence of indigenous peoples and communities, their social, political and economic organization, their cultures, practices and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy, and which are necessary to develop and guarantee their way of life." After the constitution was enacted, a nine-member Permanent Commission on Indigenous Peoples was created in the National Assembly, opening up space for indigenous participation in the legislative branch of the government for the first time.



In 2005, Venezuela passed the Organic Law on Indigenous Peoples and Communities, which expands upon principles set out in the constitution. It requires the government to guarantee certain rights for citizens of indigenous heritage, such as the right to education in indigenous languages, the right to inhabit ancestral territories, the right to choose authorities and to practice traditional forms of religion, medicine, and economic production and exchange. It requires that indigenous peoples have prior and informed consent regarding any activity that may affect their communities, such as development projects or natural resource extraction. The law also promotes political participation at all levels, including the national level, by reserving three seats in the National Assembly for elected representatives from indigenous communities.

In 2007, the Ministry of People's Power for Indigenous Peoples was established to promote a central role for indigenous communities in the construction of their own destinies. The Ministry has since facilitated the demarcation of indigenous territories and helped to provide basic services through social programs.

### Social and Economic Gains

An important aspect of the Bolivarian process has been the creation of government-funded social missions to increase popular wellbeing by providing free access to education, health care, nutrition, social security, and other essential benefits. These might once have been out of reach for the indigenous, but a program called "Mission Identity" has issued hundreds of thousands of national ID cards in native communities, allowing everyone to enjoy full citizenship rights.

Another of these missions, "Mission Guaicaipuro," was designed to promote and develop policies aimed at repaying the historical debt toward indigenous communities, ensuring respect for their rights and fostering their active participation in the process of social change currently underway in Venezuela. It was created in 2004, and operates under the Ministry of People's Power for Indigenous Peoples. Projects undertaken by this social mission have involved issues of collective land titling, food security, sustainable development, education and technology. In its first five years alone, Mission Guaicaipuro was given \$11 million in financing by Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA.

Another way in which Venezuela is repaying the historic debt toward indigenous communities is by providing access to communications, which is considered a right for all citizens. Community centers offering free internet access have been opened in indigenous areas through collaboration between the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and the Ministry of Science and Technology. Meanwhile, indigenous participation in the media has been supported by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, which have helped to fund and facilitate bilingual radio programming by Wayuu young people. Community media in indigenous languages has flourished throughout the nation, often with important help from local and state government.



Members of the Bolivarian National Guard deliver computers to primary school students in the state of Amazonas.



## Celebrating the Day of Indigenous Resistance

The Day of Indigenous Resistance is celebrated in Venezuela with an annual gathering called the Abya Yala Congress of Anti-Imperialist Indigenous Peoples of the South. "Abya-Ayala" is an ancient name for the American continents, all the way from Patagonia to Alaska, and the event honors unity and multiculturalism, providing opportunities for national and international delegations to share their experiences and views and develop common initiatives of an anti-imperialist and anti-hegemonic nature. Meanwhile, in the capital city of Caracas, official events in honor of the Day of Indigenous Resistance have taken place at the National Pantheon, where the remains of the heroic 16th-century indigenous leader Guaicaipuro (for whom "Mission Guaicaipuro" was named) were symbolically laid in 2001.

Much more remains to be done to improve the situation of indigenous communities in Venezuela, but the strides already made in this area cannot be ignored. The last decade has been decisive in turning around the situation and restoring respect for indigenous groups while ensuring their involvement in national progress. Today, indigenous peoples in Venezuela keep their struggles alive with the real conquest of more spaces and rights throughout the country.



The heroic Guaicaipuro is pictured on Venezuela's currency

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