

VICE MAYOR OF COLOGNE MEETS WITH INDIGENOUS DELEGATION

In advance of UN climate conference in Bonn, Indigenous leaders launch bus tour of Europe to promote forest peoples as proven solution for saving forests; seek new allies in battle for protection of indigenous people's rights

High-profile member of global Climate Alliance, Cologne mayor embraces goals of forest guardians, who demand title to their forests; an end to criminalization, and a deciding say in how best to slow decimation of vast tropical forests

COLOGNE, Germany— October 17, 2017. Gathering in this city just weeks before the COP23 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change opens in the nearby city of Bonn, Cologne Vice Mayor Andreas Wolter joined leaders of indigenous organizations from Mesoamerica, the Amazon, Southeast Asia and the Congo for the launch of a bus tour that will send the delegation of Indigenous leaders across Europe in a quest for allies to help them save the forests that science says are crucial to preventing climate change.

Starting and ending in Cologne, with stops in France, England, Belgium, the Netherlands and the German capital of Berlin, the delegation will share with European leaders their struggles against threats from mining, fuel extraction, illegal logging, dam construction, hydropower, roads and other mega infrastructure projects. Meetings are scheduled with members of the European Parliament and, in Paris, tentatively with French President Emmanuel Macron.

“We support these indigenous peoples in their struggle to save their territories,” Wolter said in front of the indigenous leaders he welcomed to City Hall today. “We know that if we save their territories, it’s good for our struggle against climate change.”

The meeting with Wolter is the first of a series of events for the Guardians of the Forest delegation, which is comprised of representatives of indigenous and local communities from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Brasil, Congo and Indonesia.

“For the next three weeks, we will be bringing to the people and political leaders of Europe our message of hope,” said Cándido Mezúa, an Embera leader from Panama and a member of the Alianza Mesoamericana de Pueblos y Bosques (AMPB). “We represent indigenous peoples and rural communities from the rainforests of Africa, Latin America and Indonesia, and you need us because we are the proven protectors of the tropical forests that represent the only existing large-scale solution against climate change.”

The Vice Mayor of Cologne’s commitment to indigenous peoples is also that of the leaders of some 1700 other municipalities and districts in 26 European countries, all members of the Climate Alliance, which also includes NGOs and other organizations that are actively working to combat climate change.

Their support for indigenous forest peoples as a climate solution is amply backed by science.

A major joint report published by the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) in 2014 found that legal recognition of community forest rights in 14 nations with large tropical forests led to reductions in carbon emissions, the research has piled up.

A 2016 report from Woods Hole Research Center, in collaboration with RRI and WRI, found that Indigenous Peoples and local communities manage more than 54.5 million metric tons of carbon in the tropical forests they live in globally, or just under one-quarter of the total carbon found aboveground in the global tropics. That is about 250 times the carbon dioxide emissions from global air travel in 2015.

In Brazil alone, strengthening the land rights of forest communities could help prevent the projected deforestation of 27.2 million hectares of land by 2050, according to the report. That much forest staves off an estimated 11 billion metric tons in carbon dioxide emissions; the same amount emitted every three years in all of Latin America and the Caribbean.

“Few people understand the relationship of indigenous peoples to the land,” said Dinaman Tuxá, speaking at the press event. “We need this land, if our culture is to survive. Not as something we need to transform into corn, soy or gold. But as something that exists today. No matter where we live, it is from nature that we receive our inspirations and our wisdom. It is not that we are against development, but we want development to happen while respecting our rights.”

Increasingly, industrial interests around the world, driven by rising consumer demand for timber, palm oil and minerals, are pushing deeper than ever before onto indigenous lands, and killings of activists seeking to protect native territories from destructive industries are on the rise. Governments often fail to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples to the lands they inhabit, making it easier for outside investors to move in and exploit those lands - and to stifle their voices. Indeed, of the 188 signatory countries to the historic 2016 Paris Climate Accord, only 21 include indigenous peoples and local communities in their national plans to reduce climate change.

“All of us feel the same pressures, often from the same actors,” said Mina Setra, an indigenous leader with AMAN in Indonesia. “We are making progress in establishing rights, but it is a constant battle to contain the large mining enterprises and agribusiness that eye our lands hungrily. Our peoples will defend our forests. And when we do, we are fighting for this earth. And this too is our message.”

As they make their way across Europe, the indigenous leaders on the bus tour will partner with various research organizations to release new findings that support the visitors' demands for recognition of their rights to forests they protect as a vital climate solution.

The leaders will also call for an end to the criminalization and murder of environmental defenders; respect of their right to free, prior and informed consent, regardless of whether the goal of a development project is to create a national park or a massive roadway through the rainforest. And, finally, they are calling for access to climate funds that can help forest communities in Africa, Latin America and Indonesia strengthen their sustainable community forest enterprises and assess their ancestral knowledge and incorporate it into measures and strategies that will help them prevent and adapt to climate change.

Vice Mayor Wolter said he would help the indigenous leaders push their shared case: “To reduce greenhouse gas emissions that threaten us all, we must protect the vast tropical forests that naturally reduce deadly carbons,” Wolter said. “Such protections have the power not only to keep indigenous people safe on their ancestral lands, but to stave off the dire effects of climate change in faraway places like Cologne.

Since 2015 the 2,000-year-old city of Cologne has taken in more than 14,000 refugees. Some are fleeing war, but others, from Somalia, Nigeria and beyond are leaving lands getting drier and less hospitable every year, as temperatures rise.

With so much at stake for his city, Wolter is increasingly sounding the alarm about the threat of deforestation and insecure land rights for indigenous peoples, and the role the trend plays in ramping up climate change.

Last year, Wolter attended the United Nations Climate Summit in Marrakesh, Morocco as Climate Alliance Ambassador. This March, at the invitation of indigenous leaders he met there, Wolter traveled to Peru and Ecuador to tour Amazonian indigenous lands. And in August, the Cologne City Council unanimously voted to publicly support indigenous peoples in the Peruvian Amazon in their fight against the expansion of palm oil plantations in their territories.

“When the refugees started coming here, people asked why,” Wolter said. “The point is that with our way of economic life here, in Europe as well as in the U.S., we are responsible for the problems in the Global South. It is our companies who are going in and cutting the rainforest down to extract palm oil, gold, precious woods. I think we have to change our behavior, and with this climate partnership I think we can show the people in Europe why it’s important to change our way of life.”