

Mongabay Series: Indigenous Peoples and Conservation, Latin America

Safety of Peru's land defenders in question after killing of Indigenous leader in the Amazon

by **Geraldine Santos, Gloria Alvitres** on 7 December 2023 | Translated by **Maxwell Radwin**

- *Quinto Inuma was killed on November 29 while traveling to the Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu community in Peru's Amazon following a meeting of environmental defenders.*
- *For years, the Indigenous Kichwa leader had been receiving threats for his work trying to stop invasions, land trafficking, drug trafficking and illegal logging in his community, forcing him to rely on protection measures from the Ministry of Justice.*

statement appealing for justice and holding the Peruvian state responsible for its inaction and ineffectiveness in protecting the lives of human rights defenders in Indigenous territories. Several other Indigenous leaders who receive threats have requested protection measures from the state but have not gotten a response.

- *According to an official in the Ministry of Justice, providing the Kichwa leader with protection measures was very complex because he lived in a high-risk area. The only thing that could be done, they said, is to provide permanent police protection, which wasn't possible for the local police.*

Kichwa leader Quinto Inuma Alvarado, president the Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu community, was murdered last Wednesday, November 29, in the San Martín region of the Peruvian Amazon. The crime took place around five p.m. when the activist was traveling with several relatives on the Yanayacu River. When his boat hit a tree and got stuck, a group of masked men ambushed him, shooting him several times.

Days before, in the city of Pucallpa, in the region of Ucayali, Inuma informed other environmental defenders and activists of what was happening (<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/11/indigenous-community-in-peru-losing-forests-to-timber-drug-land-trafficking/>) in his community: invasions, land trafficking, drug trafficking and illegal logging. It wasn't the first time that he'd spoken out. But no one in attendance knew it would be the last time he would.

"They murdered him for defending the community from loggers," his nephew Víctor Inuma told

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peruana/) Mongabay Latam. "My uncle had been demanding police intervention since the pandemic. No one listened to him...We ask that this be investigated. We're unprotected without him now."



Quinto Inuma carried out patrols in the forest with other members of the Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu community. Image courtesy of Quinto Inuma.

Community vice president Meister Inuma Pérez and Inuma's niece Axceldina Tapullima were also on the boat during the ambush. Inuma Pérez had to hide in the forest to avoid being killed and Tapullima was shot in the leg. Seven other Indigenous leaders have requested protection from the Ministry of Justice because of similar threats, according to Marisol García, the Kichwa leader of the Chazuta community. None of them have gotten a response. "I myself don't have protection. Every time we complain, they say they aren't serious cases," she said. "We know that those protection measures don't help but we ask for them anyway so there's a record when we're murdered."

Years of threats

García Apagueño, also president of the Federation of Kechua Chazuta Amazonas Indigenous Peoples (FEPIKECHA). "On several occasions, we've spoken out about the problems in Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu. We've spoken with many authorities. Years ago, a commission even met with the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, an institution that monitors the cases of threatened defenders." A day after the crime, a special team of prosecutors and police visited the community to collect information from witnesses and seek out the person responsible. The police are currently in charge of protecting the Inuma family, according to Ángel Gonzalez, director of Human Rights Policies and Management of the Ministry of Justice (MINJUSDH). The case is being handled by regional prosecutor Miguel Maquera Ticona from an office of the attorney general that specializes in human rights and interculturality.



Days before the ambush, Inuma spoke in Pucallpa about the land invasions and deforestation happening in his community. Image courtesy of Fondo Socioambiental del Perú.

we're going to do everything we can to support them throughout the judicial process," Gonzalez said. "We're also going to send a detailed report to the public ministry and judicial officials."

This wasn't the first attack against Quinto Inuma. In July 2021, a plane had to evacuate the Kichwa leader from his community after drug traffickers beat him up. The incident took place days after the prosecutor's office visited the community to verify the presence of illegal coca plantations.

Quinto Inuma and his family were gone for two months, staying in the city of Tarapoto, 12 hours away by river, where the Ministry of Justice had arranged for their stay. The Indigenous leader questioned his temporary transfer out of the community because the other residents there, who were also threatened by drug traffickers, had to stay behind. Eventually, he decided to return to Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu.

"Imagine what would happen to everyone else if we just left all of those who defended the Amazon and withdrew our complaints out of fear. The ones left would be at the mercy of the loggers and drug traffickers. That's why it isn't as easy for me to just leave," Quinto Inuma told Mongabay Latam (<https://es.mongabay.com/2021/07/peru-lider-indigena-kichwa-golpeado-amenazado-de-muerte-narcotrafico-bosques-tala/>) two years ago.



Members of the Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu community constantly spoke out about the advance of logging and drug trafficking. Image courtesy of Quinto Inuma.

After Inuma's death, the Coordinator for the Development and Defense of the Indigenous Peoples of the San Martín Region (CODEPISAM) — which brings together 128 Indigenous Kichwa and Awajún communities from eight local federations — released a statement

(<https://twitter.com/MongabayLatam/status/1730065558593306753>) appealing for justice.

"We condemn the death of Quinto Inuma Alvarado, our Kichwa brother, a defender of his community's territory. We hold the Peruvian state responsible for its inaction and ineffectiveness in protecting the lives of human rights defenders in Indigenous territories."

The statement referred to the inaction of the state in the face of the threats and crimes.

"After many months of advocacy, the early warning alert was activated within the framework of the Protocol for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders of the Ministry of Justice, which didn't carry out some of the measures adopted in the resolution, such as a visit of the Minister [of Justice and Human Rights] to the community and support for titling of the communal territory since 2020."

(FEMA) and the Anti-Drug Prosecutor's Office begging for prosecutor proceedings that were postponed more than a dozen times." The day after Inuma's death, several important officials arrived to the community to support the investigation, including Vice Minister of Human Rights and Access to Justice Luigino Pilotto; Vice Minister of Strategic Development of Natural Resources Mariela Cánepa; and Vice Minister of Interculturality José Rivadeneyra. Also joining the delegation were the Vice Minister of Internal Order Miguel Núñez; the General Commander of the National Police of Peru Jorge Angulo; head of the Dirincri Homicide Investigation Division Víctor Revoredo; and organized crime prosecutor Jorge Chávez Cotrina.

Protections, but only on paper

On several occasions, Inuma spoke with Mongabay Latam (<https://es.mongabay.com/2022/09/comunidad-indigena-santa-rosillo-de-yanayacu-amenazas-deforestacion-narcotrafico-peru/>) hoping to publicize the threats he and his family were receiving. At first, he asked not to be cited in Mongabay's reporting, but as the threats got worse, he decided to go public with his comments. In March 2021, Inuma also explained (<https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/>) the dangers of his situation to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. That same year, as a protective measure, the Ministry of Justice applied its Protocol for Human Rights Defenders. His brother Manuel Inuma was also listed in the program but "didn't receive any security," according to the Indigenous leader. On more than one occasion Inuma told Mongabay Latam that the

guaranteed.

"The mechanism was impossible to put into practice," said Cristina del Rosario Gavancho, an attorney with the Institute of Legal Defense (<https://www.idl.org.pe/>) (IDL). "The police always said that they didn't have the budget. They declined to go to Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu. In those last months, the Ministry of Interior, in charge of providing protection, stopped responding to his requests."

Days before Inuma's death, Indigenous leaders from Huallaga, another community in the Amazon, met with the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights and discussed the security situation in San Martín. "On Monday the 27th, representatives of the Kichwa people met with the Human Rights Directorate of the Ministry of Justice, which is in charge of the Defenders Protocol, and discussed the lack of attention to the dangers being faced by leaders in San Martín," Gavancho said.



A commission of Indigenous leaders in San Martín met with the Ministry of Justice days before the attack. Image courtesy of FEPIKECHA.

She said the situation in Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu is serious because there isn't a government presence in the area or police

police station in charge of security in the area. The trip became increasingly more dangerous because drug traffickers and loggers allegedly hid in the forest to observe him and plan an attack.

"They told us they were doing what they could with the little staff and budget they have," Gavancho said. "They also said there wasn't support from the Ministry of Interior to carry out the operations and patrols or for the police to be present in threatened communities."

Gonzalez, an official in the Ministry of Justice, said that "although Inuma did have a directorial resolution providing him with protection measures within the framework of the Protocol, in practice the situation for the Kichwa leader was very complex because he lived in a high-risk area."

The official said that in these cases, the only thing that can be done is providing permanent police protection, something that wasn't possible for the police of Huimbayoc, the district where Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu is located.

On November 30, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice released a statement

(https://twitter.com/MinjusDH_Peru/status/1730214095838711912?t=oF1myODkpruLkw3PL3y31A&s=19) on social media lamenting the death of Quinto Inuma and said they would begin an investigation. The Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Interior didn't respond to Mongabay Latam's request for comment.

Inuma isn't the only Indigenous leader who was in danger. "There are other cases of defenders in San Martín that filed early alert request months ago and don't have the document or the response from the Ministry of Justice," Gavanchos said.

The fight for a land title

Martín government as a Kichwa community located in the district of Huimbayoc. However, the community said (<https://es.mongabay.com/2022/09/comunidad-indigena-santa-rosillo-de-yanayacu-amenazas-deforestacion-narcotrafico-peru/>) the titling process hasn't moved forward. Such a title would in theory give the community a buffer against land invaders operating in and nearby the community's ancestral lands. A year ago, then-director of Land Titling and Rural Cadastre of the Regional Directorate of Agriculture William Ríos Trigoso told Mongabay Latam that there were problems carrying out georeferencing and territorial demarcation because of the conflicts between Indigenous residents and outsiders.

The former official said there are two groups in the community: the Indigenous Kichwa requesting titling for their territory and the outsiders demanding legal recognition of individual properties.

"The group of outsiders who live within the community disagree with the titling of the land as a whole," Víctor Inuma, the nephew of the murdered activist, said. "We know they were the ones who hired the hitmen."

Mongabay was not able to independently confirm this allegation.



Inuma and the leaders of Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu managed to get equipment to help monitor the territory. Image courtesy of Fondo Socioambiental del Perú.

Quinto Inuma and leader of the Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu community had managed to win financing for a project by the Socio-Environmental Fund of Peru that would improve monitoring systems in the forest. "The Apu project was proposing the installation of internet, the use of GPS and new tools the Kichwa could use to alert and report loggers as they cut down trees. It had already managed to get environmental monitoring training. He'd been involved in monitoring women leaders in the community and was happy with his progress when he returned home," said president of the Socio-Environmental Forum of Peru Lilyan Delgadillo.

Delgadillo said the last communication she had with Inuma was on November 27, two days before his death. On his trip back, he was accompanied by one of the leaders that participated in the meeting, Axceldina Tapullima, who was shot during the ambush. "The lives of women defender in Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu are also in danger," she said.

Global Witness reported (<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/almost-2000-land-and-environmental-defenders-killed-between-2012-and-2022-protecting-planet/>) that at least 177 environmental and land defenders were killed last year around the world, with the majority of killings taking place in Latin America, and that Indigenous people suffer from constant violence. Fifteen environmental defenders were killed in Peru between 2020 and 2023 while fighting for their land, according to the National Human Rights Coordinator of Peru (<https://derechoshumanos.pe/>).

Banner image: *Portrait of Quinto Inuma.*

Image courtesy of Quinto Inuma.

This article was first published here (<https://es.mongabay.com/2023/12/asesinato-lider-indigena-quinto-inuma-amazonia-peruana/>) on Mongabay's Latam site (<https://es.mongabay.com/>).

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