

## **Danielle Mitterrand and the Support of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico and South America.**

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### **Abstract**

October 12th is the International Day of Solidarity with the Peoples of the Americas, established by indigenous organizations gathered at the United Nations in 1977. This day aims to highlight the historical and cultural rights of these peoples and promote international efforts to protect them. This commitment was further strengthened by the adoption of ILO Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in 1989, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. Within this framework, Danielle Mitterrand and the France Libertés Foundation focused on the issues facing indigenous peoples in Mexico and South America, supporting human rights and humanitarian initiatives aimed at defending their rights to land, resources, and cultural identity. The following is an overview of the most prominent aspects of this role:.. Support for the Peoples of Chiapas in Mexico

The plight of the indigenous peoples of the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico was one of the humanitarian issues to which Danielle Mitterrand paid particular attention. Following the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) uprising in January 1994, led by representatives of indigenous communities demanding recognition of their political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, Danielle Mitterrand declared her support for these demands, considering them a legitimate expression of the indigenous peoples' struggle for dignity and justice. In May 1996, as president of the France Libertés Foundation, Mitterrand visited the state of Chiapas in southeastern Mexico, where she met with Subcomandante Marcos, the EZLN's deputy commander and spokesperson, along with several EZLN fighters and commanders, as well as representatives of indigenous communities. This visit, undertaken to support the indigenous people's demands for political, social, and cultural rights, contributed to raising international awareness of the Chiapas issue and expanding the network of solidarity with the Zapatista movement. During a television interview with France 2's evening news program on June 27, 1996, she expressed her pride in defending their cause, emphasizing that she was honored to be their voice and spokesperson in international forums. This reflected her commitment to supporting the rights of indigenous peoples and defending their political and humanitarian demands.

Danielle Mitterrand's visit to Chiapas in May 1996, and her meeting with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) leader, Subcomandante Marcos, provoked official reactions in Mexico. The Mexican government considered the visit interference in its internal affairs, particularly after Mitterrand's statements regarding the situation of the indigenous population and her support for the Zapatistas' demands. Amid this controversy, French Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette, during his official visit to Mexico that same month, emphasized that Danielle Mitterrand was not an envoy of the French government and that her meeting with Marcos was a personal initiative in her capacity as a human rights activist. He stressed that it did not represent the official position of France and that the French government did not support the Chiapas rebellion, in an attempt to contain the diplomatic tension and maintain Franco-Mexican relations.

Danielle Mitterrand participated in the "Intercontinental Meeting for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism," organized by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the Mexican state of Chiapas from July 27 to August 3, 1996. Representatives from 43 countries across all continents participated, aiming to exchange experiences and build international solidarity networks. Participants affirmed their rejection of neoliberal policies and their impact on peoples, particularly indigenous populations, and called for strengthened international cooperation to defend human rights and protect their lands and natural resources. Mitterrand documented her experience in Chiapas and her meeting with Vice-Commander Marcos and Zapatista leaders in her book, "Ces hommes sont avant tout nos frères" (These men are, above all, our brothers), published in 1997. In this book, she

sought to raise international awareness of the situation of indigenous peoples and their demands, and to defend their right to justice, dignity, and self-determination. Their fate, affirming that their struggle is based on human values that transcend the logic of violence and the dominance of economic interests.

On December 22, 1997, in the village of Acteal, Chiapas, indigenous communities were subjected to a massacre perpetrated by a pro-government paramilitary group. The massacre resulted in the deaths of 45 members of the Tzotzil people, mostly women and children, as they gathered for prayer inside the village church. The massacre sparked widespread international condemnation, with human rights organizations considering it evidence of escalating violence against indigenous people in Chiapas and the Mexican authorities' failure to protect them. This massacre prompted Danielle Mitterrand and the France Libertés Foundation to intensify their efforts to defend indigenous rights. The foundation condemned the repeated human rights violations in Chiapas and organized international awareness campaigns demanding respect for the fundamental rights of indigenous people and promoting the democratic transition in the region. Danielle Mitterrand continued her support for the indigenous cause in Chiapas through the France Libertés Foundation, which participated in In November 1999, Danielle Mitterrand participated in the work of the International Civilian Commission for Human Rights Monitoring, which prepared a report on the human rights situation in the state and submitted it to the then United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson. Mitterrand's role was not limited to documenting violations and advocating for human rights in international forums; she also ensured that this commitment was translated into practical initiatives. The foundation supported humanitarian and development projects targeting local communities, including improving health services, providing food aid, and implementing human rights awareness programs. This approach reflects the vision of Direct action stemming from its conviction that defending rights is only complete when it includes strengthening the foundations for a dignified life and sustainable development for marginalized communities.

#### Supporting the Quechua people in Ecuador

Supporting the Quechua people in the Sarayaku region of the Ecuadorian Amazon has been a key focus of the humanitarian work of the France Libertés Foundation, headed by Danielle Mitterrand. The foundation adopted the cause of this people, who, since the 1990s, have waged a long struggle to defend their land, natural resources, and culture against oil exploration projects, becoming a prominent example of indigenous resistance in Latin America in defense of their collective rights and their right to manage their traditional resources. As part of this struggle, the Sarayaku people developed an integrated development project known as the "Plan Tayak," aimed at enabling the local community to preserve its traditional way of life within its historical lands, while protecting biodiversity and safeguarding cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge. France Libertés recognized this plan as a model of sustainable development based on respect for both people and nature, and thus supported several of its projects in collaboration with the local community. One of the most prominent of these initiatives was the "Sasi Wasi" project, launched in 2006 with the foundation's support. Its aim was to establish a traditional medicine center built in the Quechua architectural style, reviving inherited healing practices based on the use of medicinal plants, and organizing training programs for traditional healers and the transfer of expertise. Passing down traditional medicine to new generations contributes to preserving the knowledge and cultural identity of the local community.

The Sasi Wasi project was not a separate initiative, but rather a key component of the Tayak Plan, which also included the Sisa Nampi (Flower Trail) project to delineate the historical boundaries of Sarayaku territory with a distinctive aerial display of flowering vegetation; the creation of the Sacha Runa Botanical Garden to conserve medicinal plants and biodiversity; and the Tayak Wasi project, which aims to establish schools dedicated to transmitting traditional knowledge and indigenous culture to new generations.

These projects were implemented in partnership with ATAYAK (Asociación de Yachaks de Sarayaku), an organization of traditional community healers headed by José Gualinga, and in collaboration with the Paroles de Nature association, which advocates for Sarayaku in France. And strengthening cooperation with the France Libertés Foundation. In the same year, the Foundation supported the launch of the "Frontière de Vie – Sisa Nampi" project, which was based on the philosophy of "Buen Vivir" (Well-being) as an alternative development model that balances humanity and nature and respects the rights of indigenous peoples. The project aimed to demarcate

the historical boundaries of Saraiaku territory, promote biodiversity protection, and preserve the traditional environmental knowledge passed down through generations by the Quechua people. The support provided by the France Libertés Foundation contributed to the completion of the first phase of the “Sasi Wasi” project, and funding was renewed in 2008 and 2010 to complete the center's facilities and create a medicinal plant garden. The center was officially opened in September 2010 as a center for traditional medicine and the documentation of local knowledge. It provided first aid and herbal medicine services, organized training courses, and held meetings that brought together community elders and youth, ensuring the transmission of traditional knowledge and strengthening the continuity of the people's cultural identity. The Quechua.

Despite this progress, not all projects of the Tayac Plan were completed, as some components remained under implementation. Meanwhile, the Foundation continued to support the demands of the Sarayako people to protect their lands and natural resources from oil expansion and to ensure respect for their collective rights.

As part of its efforts to strengthen international cooperation, the Foundation hosted José Gualinga, one of the most prominent leaders of the Quechua people, in France. Discussions focused on ways to promote the philosophy of “Buen Vivir” (a dignified life) and to develop new development indicators that consider both people and the environment, rather than relying solely on traditional economic indicators. The Foundation viewed the Sarayako experience and the “Limits of Life” project as a practical model demonstrating the possibility of building sustainable development based on environmental conservation, respect for indigenous cultures, and the protection of their rights to their lands and natural resources. This visit also contributed to expanding cooperation between the Foundation and the Sarayako community and sharing its experience with the European public.

#### Indigenous Peoples of Colombia

Through the France Libertés Foundation, Danielle Mitterrand paid particular attention to the issues of indigenous peoples in Colombia, especially those facing persecution. Violations stemming from the expansion of extractive industries. Colombia is home to approximately 87 indigenous groups, concentrated in the departments of Cauca, Nariño, and La Guajira. Statistics indicate that the indigenous population numbered around 1,450,000 in 2005, while nearly one million faced direct threats to their fundamental rights, primarily the right to land and natural resources.

The organization has been monitoring the situation of several of these communities, particularly the Nasa people, who own approximately 600,000 hectares of mountainous land in the Cauca department. However, land acquisition and reallocation policies for mining, oil, banana, sugarcane, and palm oil production have reduced their land area and confined them to small reserves, negatively impacting their economic and social conditions.

France Libertés also highlighted the plight of the Kogui and Wayuu peoples, particularly on the La Guajira Peninsula, where the expansion of coal mining has led to the displacement of indigenous populations, air, water, and soil pollution, and increased poverty and malnutrition due to the decline of traditional livelihoods. In this context, the organization supported international campaigns to hold multinational corporations accountable, including Anglo American, which has faced widespread criticism for the environmental and human impacts of its mining projects.

France Libertés' role extended beyond documentation and condemnation; it also worked to bring the demands of local communities to international forums and supported efforts to ensure respect for the right to prior consultation, the right to water, and food security—rights that came under scrutiny in Colombian courts after indigenous communities objected to a river diversion project for mining operations. Drawing on Danielle Mitterrand's vision linking human rights and environmental justice, the foundation considered the situation in Colombia a prime example of what it termed “extractivism”—the excessive exploitation of natural resources at the expense of indigenous peoples. Therefore, the foundation published its booklet, “Stop the Sacrifice Zones: For Alternatives to Our System Based on the Plunder of Natural Resources,” which condemned the abuses resulting from this economic model. It also released the interactive documentary, “Intensive Exploitation of Natural Resources: Rethinking Our Societal Choices,” to raise awareness of the impacts of extractive industries and advocate for development models that are more respectful of the rights of indigenous peoples and the environment.

This trend extended to other Latin American countries, particularly Brazil, where Danielle Mitterrand and the France Libertés Foundation intensified their support for the Amazonian peoples and indigenous populations since the 1990s. This support manifested in backing initiatives aimed at protecting land and natural resources, and defending the rights of these communities against economic expansion based on the depletion of forests and

natural resources. This aligns with the Foundation's vision of defending the collective rights of peoples and their right to manage their resources fairly and sustainably.

—Supporting the Mapuche People in Argentina and Chile

The Mapuche people live in a region spanning southern Argentina and Chile and are among the oldest indigenous peoples in the area. Approximately 115,000 of them reside in the Argentine province of Neuquén, and they continue to defend their ancestral lands, which form the basis of their cultural and social identity. These communities have been embroiled in protracted conflicts with authorities and investment companies due to the expansion of oil, gas, and shale gas extraction projects, as well as the appropriation of vast swathes of their traditional lands by private companies. Among the most prominent of these is the Italian Benetton Group, which, since 1991, has owned approximately 900,000 hectares in Patagonia—lands the Mapuche claim as part of their historical homeland

In the final years of her life, Danielle Mitterrand, through the France Libertés Foundation, intensified her efforts to support the Mapuche cause, making it a central focus of the foundation's work in defending the rights of indigenous peoples. This support went beyond mere expressions of solidarity with their demands; it also took on a legal and diplomatic dimension. The foundation worked to bring their plight to the attention of international organizations, leveraging its consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. In this context, the foundation submitted written statements to the UN Human Rights Council regarding the violations suffered by the Mapuche people in Chile, particularly arbitrary arrests, police violence, and violations of the rights to land and a fair trial.

The foundation also supported initiatives launched by Mapuche representatives, including open letters calling for an end to the harassment and persecution targeting their communities, notably the letter from community leader Lonka Juana Kalfuano. In addition to its human rights work, France Libertés worked to raise international awareness of the Mapuche issue through cultural and educational activities, including including them among the indigenous peoples featured in the educational game "Otoktonia," which aimed to introduce the history of indigenous peoples, the challenges they face, and their methods of peaceful resistance to defend their lands and rights.

These efforts show that Danielle Mitterrand, even in the last years of her life, continued her commitment to defending indigenous peoples, and considered the Mapuche cause part of her broader project to protect the collective rights of peoples, defend their right to land, identity and culture, and confront policies that lead to their marginalization or the criminalization of their legitimate struggle.

The Asháninka People of Peru

Approximately 97,500 Asháninka people live in Peru, facing constant threats due to illegal forest exploitation and logging in the Amazon. The assassination of their leader, Edwin Chota, along with several members of his Saweto community, for leading a campaign to defend the forest and oppose illegal logging, highlighted the risks faced by environmental and indigenous rights defenders in Peru.

Similarly, activist Máxima Acuña Chaupe has emerged as a prominent advocate for indigenous communities' land rights. Since 2011, she has been embroiled in a conflict with the Yanacocha gold mining company after one of its mining concessions encroached upon her community's land. When she and her family refused to leave their land, they faced threats, harassment, and legal action on charges of land grabbing, before she was able to prove her rights in court.

As part of its commitment to defending the rights of Indigenous peoples and opposing extractive policies, the France Libertés Foundation, under the leadership of Danielle Mitterrand, played a prominent role in supporting this cause. It worked to support local communities and convey their demands to international bodies, leveraging its consultative status with the United Nations. The Foundation also helped empower representatives of affected communities to present their grievances before international forums, aiming to draw attention to the environmental and social impacts of extractive projects and to defend the rights of Indigenous peoples to their lands and natural resources.

The France Libertés Foundation welcomed the awarding of the Goldman Environment Prize to Máxima Acuña, considering it an international recognition of the struggle of the Cajamarca communities against mining projects. At the same time, the foundation emphasized that international awards, despite their symbolic importance, are insufficient to guarantee the safety of human rights and environmental defenders. It cited the assassination of

Honduran activist Berta Cáceres, another recipient of the same award, as evidence of the ongoing dangers faced by environmental activists and defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples in Latin America.

—Supporting the Guarani and Ashaninka peoples in Paraguay and Brazil:

Through the France Libertés Foundation, Danielle Mitterrand broadened her focus during the last two decades of her life to include defending the rights of the Guarani people in both Paraguay and Brazil, based on her conviction that the right to land and natural resources is fundamental to the survival and cultural identity of indigenous peoples. Despite Paraguay's legal recognition of indigenous rights, the organization emphasized that this recognition has had limited impact due to the absence of legislation and enforcement measures to protect those rights. This has left the Guarani people vulnerable to land grabs and ongoing violations rooted in the Alfredo Stroessner regime (1954–1989), the effects of which persisted even after the transition to democracy.

In Brazil, the France Libertés Foundation monitored the situation of the Guarani-Kaiowá people, who have faced escalating land grabs since the 1990s due to agricultural expansion, hydroelectric projects, and deforestation. The organization highlighted the forced displacement and armed attacks suffered by this people, as well as the threats to their survival resulting from widespread deforestation in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Danielle Mitterrand and her foundation's activism extended beyond denouncing these violations; it also addressed the phenomenon of biopiracy. The foundation, in collaboration with international organizations, participated in a campaign to defend the intellectual property rights of the Guarani people regarding the stevia plant, after international companies appropriated their traditional knowledge of its local properties without their consent or sharing the benefits. In this context, the foundation launched an international campaign and published its report, "Stevia... A Sweetness with a Bitter Taste" (*Stévia, une douceur au goût amer*), which called for the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional knowledge and for holding the companies profiting from it accountable.

In her ongoing commitment to the peoples of the Amazon, Danielle Mitterrand strengthened her collaboration with the Asháninka people of the Brazilian state of Acre, who were facing increasing threats from illegal logging and drug trafficking networks. Among those who stood out was activist Benki Piyäko, who received direct support from the France Libertés Foundation. He was invited to France in 2010 and 2013 to participate in events aimed at raising awareness of his people's plight and mobilizing international support for the defense of Indigenous rights. The Foundation also collaborated with Benki Piyäko and his community on the Yorenka Atame project, which aims to protect traditional forestry knowledge, preserve the cultural and environmental heritage of Indigenous peoples, and promote sustainable development in the Amazon region. Through this activity, Danielle Mitterrand embodied the vision of the France Libertés Foundation, which is based on combining the defense of human rights, the protection of the environment, and the preservation of the knowledge heritage of indigenous peoples, stressing that the preservation of forests is inseparable from the protection of the societies that have lived in them for centuries....

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- (4) The state of Chiapas in southeastern Mexico is one of the most prominent regions inhabited by indigenous peoples, including groups belonging to the Mayan civilization, such as the Testel, Tzotzil, Chull, and Tojolabal. Historically, European colonizers referred to them as "Indians." Since the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, these peoples have suffered land confiscation, economic exploitation, and social and cultural marginalization, leading to a decline in their living conditions and centuries of ongoing suffering. Faced with these circumstances, the indigenous peoples continued their struggle for their rights, culminating in the Zapatista National Liberation Army uprising of January 1, 1994, which called for the recognition of indigenous rights and the establishment of social justice and democracy. The Zapatistas managed to extend their influence over several rural areas, where they established self-governing structures known as "Juntas de Buen Gobierno" (Councils of Good Governance) to manage local community affairs. For further details, see: Raúl Zepechi, "The Self-Government Experience in

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(8) Neoliberalism is an economic and political philosophy or approach that advocates reducing the role of the state in the economy and giving the free market a leading role in regulating economic activity. It promotes privatization, free trade, opening markets to investment, and minimizing government restrictions. The Zapatista movement (EZLN) argues that neoliberalism leads to: the concentration of wealth in the hands of large corporations; the marginalization of farmers and indigenous peoples; the privatization of land and natural resources; the weakening of local community sovereignty; and the deepening of poverty and inequality. Therefore, it adopted the slogan "Against Neoliberalism," considering the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect on January 1, 1994, to be one of the most prominent manifestations of neoliberal policies. NAFTA opened the Mexican market to foreign competition, harming farmers and indigenous peoples, particularly in the state of Chiapas. For further details, see: Richard Stahler-Sholk, "Globalization and Social Movement Resistance: The Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico," *New Political Science* 23, no. 4 (2001): 495-515.

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