



## SARSTOON TEMASH INSTITUTE FOR INDIGENOUS MANAGEMENT

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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[www.satiim.org.bz](http://www.satiim.org.bz)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNb2gJ8ueWU&feature=youtu.be>

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36114383>

### **SATIIM Community Forest Patrols Stopped by Guatemalan Military**

*Mayans now need a military escort to enter ancestral lands*

*"Mayan natural resource management pre-dates 150 years of border disputes."*

**(Punta Gorda, Belize) November 13 2016** – The Guatemalan military stopped a community forest patrol organized by the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management to monitor deforestation and illegal activity on their ancestral lands in southern Belize.

"Only if you are military, no fishing, no protected areas, nothing," said a Guatemalan military representative to the patrol team.

"Once you ask permission, we will accompany you," he added.

This incident is the latest in military confrontations with civilians on both sides of the border. In April, Belize soldiers shot and killed a 13-year-old Guatemalan boy. In response, Guatemalan Defence Minister William Mansilla announced the deployment of 3,000 troops on the border.

While SATIIM forest patrols have previously been accosted by the Guatemalan military in this historically contested border area, this is the first time the Mayans were informed they could only enter under Guatemalan military escort.

"Only the military can come through here," said the Guatemalan official.

For more than ten years, local community patrols have collected the only data on a region recognized for its international importance by the RAMSAR Convention. In 1997 the Belize government created the Sarstoon Temash National Park on land alongside the natural border between the countries created by the Sarstoon river basin. Local Indigenous communities were not previously informed of its decision to turn their ancestral land into a park (and therefore never gave their consent). However, for almost ten years they continued to monitor the region under a 'co-management'

[Linking biological diversity management with the physical and cultural survival of Indigenous People](#)

agreement with the Belizean government.

SATIIM, an ngo that the communities created to serve as their liaison with the government and outside world, has trained community forest patrols who provide the Belize Forest Department with the only information on human intervention in this fragile wetlands region. Following the creation of large paths blasted through the park for oil exploration, these patrols recorded evidence of increased illegal activity, such as illegal logging and poaching.

“These Maya communities are caught in the crosshairs of an international border conflict for simply trying to defend their ancestral lands” said Froyla Tzalam, SATIIM Executive Director.

“Mayan natural resource management pre-dates 150 years of border disputes,” added Tzalam. “Both governments need to find a way to allow local communities to freely protect their natural resources – without threat or harassment.”

Aside from the growing military presence, neither government has allotted adequate resources to documenting environmental degradation in this river basin that feeds directly into the barrier reef.

“Local communities are the only people who deeply know and care for this region,” said SATIIM’s Tzalam.

In October the Belize Coalition to Save Our Natural Heritage recognized SATIM for “its tireless efforts in both conservation and human rights.”

In August a SATIIM community forest patrol found evidence of logging along the Sarstoon River, harvesting of comfrey palms, and gill net fishing in the Temash River. The data showed 50 seismic trails cut by from the mouth of Sarstoon River to Black Creek alone. Two trails showed recent activity in which Santa Maria trees were harvested and cut into lumber, ready for transport.

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*Background:*

The Sarstoon Temash National Park is composed of more than 40,000 acres of broadleaf, wetland and mangrove forest along the border of southern Belize and southeastern Guatemala. Its 13 unique ecosystems are home to more than 200 species of birds, 24 types of mammals, more than twenty types of reptiles, 42 varieties of fish and almost fifty kinds of butterflies and moths.

In 2005, the STNP was declared a RAMSAR site -a wetland of global importance. But a year later, oil exploration resulted in the creation of large paths wide enough for jeep traffic. As a result, SATIIM patrols have documented increased deforestation and illegal activity in this nominally protected area.

The territorial dispute between the two Central American nations dates back more than

150 years. Belize became independent in 1981; however Guatemala did not recognise it for another decade because of the land dispute.