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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **JUSTICE INSTITUTE GUYANA LAUNCHES A GUIDE FOR AMERINDIAN LAND CLAIMS**

The Justice Institute Guyana has launched a new Guide “Making an Amerindian Land Claim.” The guide is designed to help Amerindian communities to use the Amerindian Act 2006 to secure title to lands which they have traditionally occupied and used. The guide was produced with the support of the European Delegation in Guyana. In his opening remarks at the launch Ambassador Robert Kopecky congratulated the Justice Institute Guyana and stated that Guyana should be proud of the Amerindian Act 2006.

The guide provides simple step by step instructions for Amerindian communities, many of whom still do not understand their rights under the Amerindian Act 2006. According to Clarindo Lucas, a respected Wapichan leader and former Toshao of Aishalton, a Wapichan community in the south of Guyana, “We have the Amerindian Act 2006 and we must use it. It gives me great pleasure to launch this guide which will help Amerindian communities all over Guyana.”

The guide explains how an Amerindian community can obtain title to land based on 25 years occupation. The community’s right to title depends on being able to show occupation and use as a traditional Amerindian community. By law the community’s traditional and cultural attachment to the land as well as its spiritual relationship with the land must be taken into account in deciding the area of land to be titled to the community. Amerindian land titles are protected under the Constitution of Guyana and are absolute and forever.

There are 109 Amerindian communities in Guyana. Of these 109 Amerindian communities, ninety-eight (98) already own land. Eleven (11) do not have title to the land they occupy and use. About forty (40) out of the ninety-eight (98) communities with title want extensions. Therefore about fifty (50) communities still have land issues which they can settle using the Amerindian Act 2006.

According to Melinda Janki, director of the Justice Institute Guyana, “In many countries getting land title is the goal. The story ends when you get your land title as an indigenous people. But in Guyana when you get your land title, that is when the story really begins. The Amerindian Act 2006 gives Amerindian villages control over the lands which they own. They decide whether they want mining, forestry, conservation, tourism and so on. They can choose freely how their communities will live today and in the future. They write their future themselves.”

The Amerindian Act 2006 entrenches democracy through the traditional Amerindian community meeting in which decisions are made collectively by consensus. The elected Village councils are the voice of the community and must also act collectively. Even the Toshao (elected chief) does not have the power to take individual decisions without the backing of the community. The Amerindian Act recognises the collective identity of Amerindian peoples and the authority of their elected Village Councils. Nongovernmental organisations are no longer able to claim a legitimate role to speak for Amerindian peoples, to represent Amerindian peoples or to carry out projects on behalf of Amerindian peoples. Funding agencies, the business sector, government bodies and others who interact with Amerindian peoples are having to alter their behaviour and attitudes in order to ensure respect for the collective rights and collective identity of the Amerindian peoples of Guyana.

In concluding the launch of the guide, Melinda Janki stated

“It is now up to Amerindian communities to hold their elected Toshaos and Village Councillors to account. At the Justice Institute we will continue to teach people what rights they have. We will show them how to meet their responsibilities. But ultimately, it is up to the Amerindian peoples of Guyana how they use their rights and how they meet their responsibilities as citizens and peoples of this country.”

The launch of the guide was attended by members of the diplomatic corps, Amerindian Toshaos, MPs, the Indigenous Peoples Commission, lawyers, clergy and activists. The Justice Institute is providing free copies of the guide to Amerindian communities across Guyana.