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Ecuador: Indigenous peoples in the Ecuadorian Amazon are threatened by oil exploitation

Indigenous peoples in Ecuador are faced with several economic projects of exploitation of their lands and natural resources. Besides oil exploitation there is mining, hydroelectric plants, forest concessions and sales of land that are threatening the indigenous peoples and their biodiversity. Oil exploitation is a serious problem for indigenous peoples in the Amazon as it destroys their sensible environment, cultures, and is accompanied with direct human rights violations and militarization of indigenous territories.

The Waorani are overrun by logging and oil extracting companies

The approximately 2,500 Waorani live in an area of the Ecuadorian rain forest that overlaps the world-famous Yasuni-National Park. Considering the vast diversity of its fauna and flora the Yasuni was already declared a national park in 1979. Then, in 1989 the UNESCO declared the park a biosphere reserve.

Today, whenever the Waorani walk through their native rain forest area in the Yasuni National Park, and surrounding area to hunt, collect, fish or farm, they come across drill-holes, contaminated rivers, roads and cleared forest. Illegal tree-fellers cut down the trees, and trans-national and national oil companies divide the area up into blocks, which they are then allowed to exploit. The Spanish-Argentine firm Repsol YPF is in Block 16, the French Perenco in Block 7 and 21, Agip from Italy in Block 10, the Brazilian Petrobras in Block 31 and Andes Petroleum – consisting of the Chinese state company CNPC and Sinopec – in Block 17. In May 2006, the Ecuadorian companies Tecpecuador and Petroecuador took over Block 15 from the US-American Occidental. The Ecuadorian military is currently safeguarding the oil wells, and demonstrates resolute reactions in cases of protest against oil drilling and pollution of the ecosystem.

The Ecuadorian government made the suggestion to not touch the oil block ITT (Ishpingo-Tapococha-Tiputini) East of the Yasuni Park in case of being financially recompensed by the international community. Meanwhile, it gave exploitation concessions to the Brazilian company Petrobras for bloc 31, which lies next to the ITT. The umbrella organisation of the Waorani people has criticised the government in that they were not even informed about the company's plans that directly effect their territory and hunting grounds.

Survival of Tagaeri and Taromenanes

Some Waorani groups like the Tagaeri and Taromenanes live in voluntary isolation and have refused all contact with the outside world. Their exact number is not known, but it is estimated

at about 300 persons, organised within five different clans. They are currently living in a situation of critical danger, where they are being overrun by an invasion of illegal timber companies and transnational corporations like the Brazilian Petrobras and the Spanish-Argentine Repsol YPF. The exploitation of timber, oil and other resources has been accompanied by massacres that have not yet been brought to justice.

Quichua in Pastaza

There are several cases in which oil exploitation on indigenous land has been connected to human rights violations. A horrifying example is the spate of death threats and killings against spiritual leaders and shamans of various indigenous communities in the region of the Bobonaza River. An alarming number of Shamans such as, Venancio Santi, Otonil Gualinga, Cervantino Cadena, Isaac Santi, and Polibio Machoa have already been murdered. The shamans Miguel Santi, César Vargas, Don Sabino Gualinga, Pancracio Santi, Héctor Cadena, Isidro Tuti and César Elías Cueva have received death threats.

The shamans are traditional spiritual authorities and play a central role in the indigenous communities' culture and way of life. They are the main stakeholders in refusing indigenous consensus to oil exploitation, since they are fervently against the opening of the South-eastern Ecuadorian Amazon.