

Indian Communities Trapped by Ecuador-Peru Border Conflict

Fighting erupted between the Peruvian and Ecuadorian armies in a disputed Amazon border region along the Cenepa River valley on Jan. 26. What looked at first like an isolated border skirmish has escalated into an intense conflict with at least 47 dead and 94 wounded combatants. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) demanded a cease fire on Jan. 31, stating that, "more than 300 communities are located in the zone of military conflict, these Indigenous communities that have not been attended by either the government of Peru or of Ecuador".

An unknown number of Indian residents of the region have been displaced from their communities, despite calls by CONAIE for the governments to respect the lives and territory of Indigenous peoples. The war is reportedly costing each side over \$10 million a day, and has heated up with bombings on each side of the border and the downing of several Peruvian planes and a helicopter. Ecuador accepted a cease-fire mediation offer from former US president Jimmy Carter and former Costa Rica president Oscar Arias, but Peru declined to comment on the offer.

OAS Commission Investigates Ecuadorian Human Rights Violations

For years, Indigenous organizations in the Ecuadorian Amazon have suffered human rights violations as a result of massive oil development carried out by US-based multinational corporations and the Ecuadorian government within their territories. The struggle to resolve these problems hit a turning point on Nov. 7 when the Organization of American States' special commission on human rights arrived in Ecuador to investigate human rights abuses in that country.

Although the commission framed its visit as a general investigation of the human rights situation in Ecuador, the impact of oil development on Indigenous peoples was one of two topics the Commission actually investigated (the other being the treatment of prisoners). Half of the Commission's delegation traveled to the Oriente region, where they met with representatives from grassroots organizations and leaders of the Cofan and Siona-Secoya ethnic groups. Commission members were appalled at the impact of Texaco oil development on the environment. The Commission also met with a Huaorani community from the Napo region who reported on pollution and the encroachment of colonists in their territory.

In addition to meeting with state authorities, the Commission consulted environmental, human rights, and Indigenous organizations, including representatives from: CONAIE, CONFENIAE, COICA, ECUARUNARI, FICI, FOIN, and OINAE.

At a press conference concluding their visit, the commission announced that the government could stand in violation of the right to life and well-being as a result of oil pollution in the Amazon. A final report on the visit has yet to be released.

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Peruvian Indian Communities File Suit Against Texaco

On December 29, a class action lawsuit was filed in federal court in New York on behalf of 20,000 Indigenous people living on and around the Napo River in the northeast Peruvian Amazon. The suit charges that mismanaged Texaco activities within Ecuador, along the upper reaches of the Napo River, caused severe damage to the Indians' way of life in Peru— damage due to the release of huge amounts of toxic chemicals, and to repeated oil spills. This case follows a ground-breaking victory by Ecuadorian Indian organizations in the spring of 1994, when a New York court held that Texaco could be held liable in US courts for their actions in Ecuador.

The Peruvian suit charges that "Texaco deliberately ignored reasonable and safe practices and treated the pristine Amazon rain forest...and its people as a toxic waste dump." It further contends that over 400 flawed well sites were built, despite Texaco's full knowledge that they would result in severe spills and environmental damages.

The Ecuadorian government estimates that Texaco spilled 16.8 million gallons of crude oil and oil residues in its Amazonian provinces, with an unknown portion winding up downriver in Peru. As recently as 1992, the Peruvian Rio Napo ran black with crude that had been released upstream.

Information provided by Edward Hammond.

Brazilian Senate Proposes Law Threatening Land Demarcation

The Brazilian Senate approved a bill aimed at eventually reducing existing Indian Areas within frontier zones, and complicating the process of future demarcations. To become law, this bill will have to be approved by the Chamber of Deputies and the President of the Republic. If approved, the bill will put the already demarcated Yanomami Indian Area, located along the Venezuelan border, at risk of being reduced.

The bill threatens not only the Yanomami, but would be a blow to all Indian peoples in Brazil. It is supported by economic groups with a vested interest in exploiting the natural resources within the Indian Areas, as well as certain sectors of