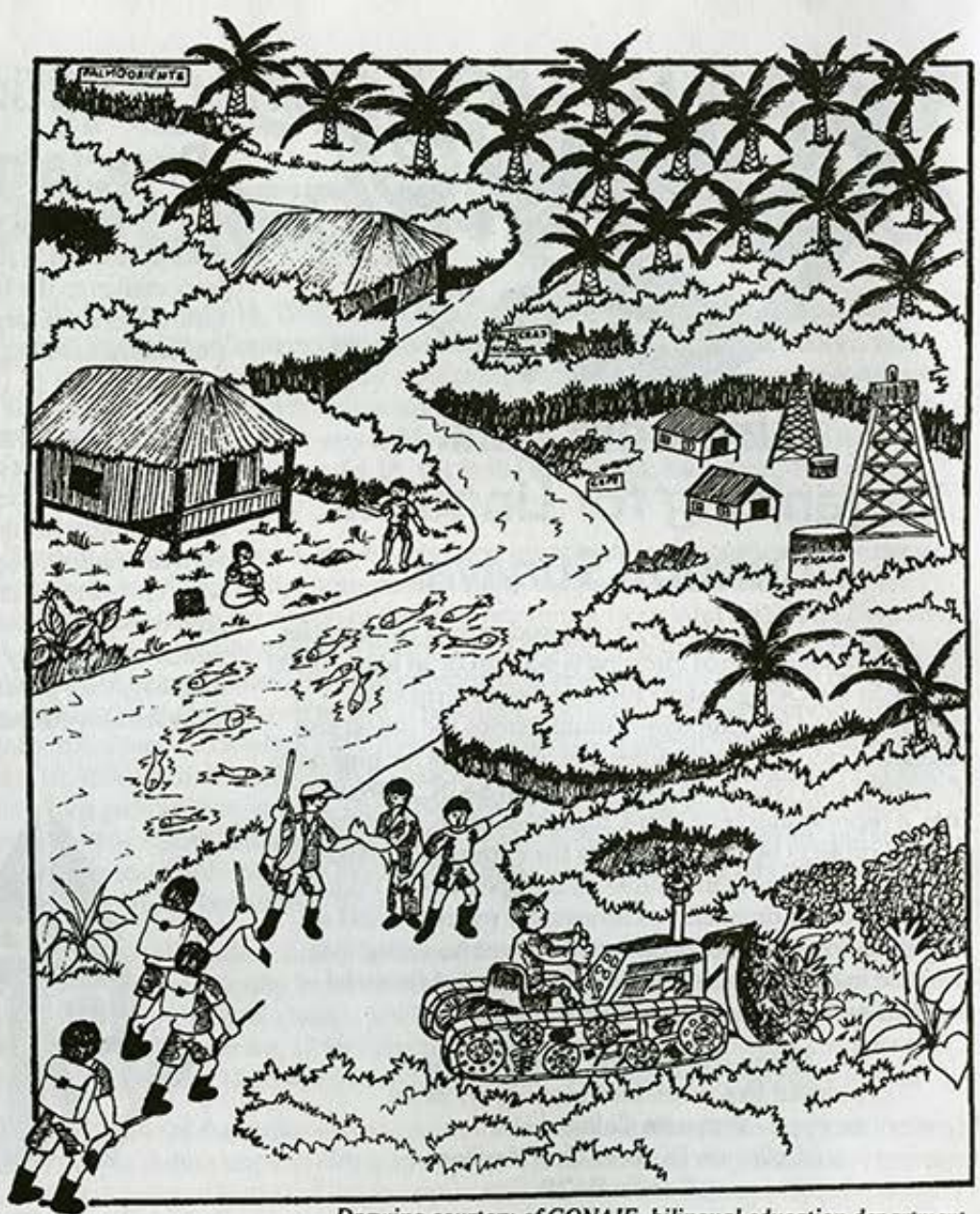


AMAZON



Drawing courtesy of CONAIE, bilingual education department.

OIL WARS IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON!

An Interview with Leonardo Viteri

(Ecuador) Leonardo Viteri, of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) and the Organization of Indigenous People of Pastaza (OPIP) visited the Bay Area last Spring, on a speaking tour of North America. He is a Quichua Indian from the community of Saragura in the Province of Pastaza in Ecuador's Amazon region. Approximately 200,000 Indian people live in this region, with the Quichuas numbering around 90,000. Other groups include the Shuar, Huaorani, Cofanes, Siones and the Secoya. The following is excerpted from an interview between SAIIC and Leonardo.

SAIIC: I understand that you come from a large family. Are all the members of your family actively involved in the defense of the rights of Indian peoples?

Yes, we worked first of all to achieve unity in our methods and politics at the level of the family. This allowed us to obtain the necessary backing and support for our work and also to involve the whole family in the cause of indigenous peoples. I do come from a large family - I have nine brothers and sisters, and we are all working with different organizations and focusing on distinct areas of work.

SAIIC: When did you begin to organize yourselves at the regional and national levels?

In the Amazon region, the Shuar Federation was the first to undertake a broad and significant process of organizing. Thereafter, indigenous peoples like the Quichua, Cofanes, Siones and Secoya, and most recently the Huaorani, have organized themselves. The Quichua people of Pastaza have been organized since 1978, and we form part of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP).

SAIIC: Can you describe in greater detail what CONFENAIE is, and whom it represents?

CONFENAIE is a regional, non-governmental organization of indigenous peoples. It represents six nationalities that live in the Amazon region, specifically the Quichua, the Shuar-Achuar, the Huaorani, the Cofanes, the Siona, and the Secoya. CONFENAIE was established in the Amazon 11 years ago, and it is the representative organization of the majority of indigenous peoples of the Amazon.

SAIIC: What has been the impact of the petroleum companies on indigenous peoples?

The government's oil policy has provoked the plunder of 5,200,000 hectares of indigenous territory in the last twenty years, because it has awakened the ambitions of outsiders to come in and grab land. Immense areas of land have also been given as concessions to timber companies, to agribusiness companies cultivating African palm trees, to tourist companies, and to the armed forces. At present, the oil companies are occupying some 3,080,000 hectares. Their operations exploit the entire Amazon region. The presence of the companies also implies cultural changes because at times our people go to work for the companies. This creates an economic dependency, and also transforms their way of thinking. Other life-styles, other attitudes

toward work, nutrition and social behavior are adopted, all of which diverge totally from the culture of our people.

SAIIC: When did the incursion of the petroleum companies begin in the Ecuadorian Amazon?

The petroleum problem began for indigenous peoples as far back as 1926. Since that time we have been waging a petroleum war in the Amazon. Confronted by our permanent opposition and struggle, the companies have withdrawn on several occasions, but in 1970 they returned with much greater force. This date marks the beginning of

the oil boom in the Amazon, which has been one of the most complicated and conflictive periods of our time, and also one of the most destructive in terms of the region and the cultures of indigenous peoples.

SAIIC: Why have indigenous territories been militarized?

Those who stand in opposition to the interests of indigenous peoples are very concerned by the accelerated process of organizing being carried out by indigenous peoples of the Amazon and throughout Ecuador in general. Through the creation of regional confederations, such as CONFENAIE in the Amazon, ECUARUNARI in the Sierra, and COICE in the coastal region, we have been able to unite and successfully organize ourselves at the national level. CONAIE, the Confederation of Indigenous



Photo by M. Hegeman

Leonardo Viteri on his visit to North America.

Nationalities of Ecuador, represents the synthesis of all of the regional organizations. Through CONAIE, we are able to struggle and put forth, as a united front, our proposals to the Ecuadorian State in order to seriously discuss and find solutions to the problems that have built up as a result of 500 years of oppression. The militarization of our territories and the persecution of indigenous peoples is also due to the struggle ignited by the indigenous uprising of June of 1990. The policy of repression which the Ecuadorian government has adopted has caused many problems for us.

SAIIC: What companies are operating in the Amazon?

There are more than 22 oil companies operating in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Fifteen of these are from the United States. Texaco, which has been there for almost twenty years, is the company that has caused the greatest ecological and social damage in the region. ARCO, which is also present and operating in the territory of Pastaza, has militarized its block in the face of opposition from the

(see Leonardo, p. 45)

militarized its block in the face of opposition from the indigenous peoples of the zone.

SAIIC: Is the military guarding the petroleum wells?

Yes. At this very moment there are military troops guarding the oil wells, particularly those in ARCO's Block 10 and Occidental Petroleum's Block 15. The Conoco (a division of Dupont) company is also involved with petroleum exploitation in the Yasuní Park, territory which belongs to the Hauorani.

SAIIC: What is Conoco planning to do in the Amazon?

Conoco wants to exploit the reserves it has found within the Yasuní Park, which are yielding some 40 thousand barrels of oil a day. In order to exploit these reserves the company wants to construct a highway through the park. There is strong opposition to this plan from indigenous peoples, ecological organizations in Ecuador, and the public in general, because it represents a serious threat to the ecological integrity of the Yasuní Park. For this reason Conoco has begun a series of maneuvers in the area - dividing communities, trying to cause confrontations between indigenous peoples allied with religious organizations and the military, the colonists, and companies with interests in the region - basically to confuse national and international opinion. At the same time, Conoco has begun to use environmental groups in the US, like the NRDC (Natural Resource Defense Council), or perhaps this group has offered itself to support the interests of Conoco in order to convince indigenous peoples to negotiate the extraction of petroleum in these territories. Arguments being used are: a) it would be impossible to get Conoco out of the region, b) Conoco's proposal for environmental regulation is better than anyone else's, and c) if Conoco leaves, other much more destructive companies like Braspetro from Brazil, will move in. With these kinds of arguments they have tried to pressure indigenous peoples and elicit their approval for the negotiations.

SAIIC: We understand that CONFENAIE has filed an international lawsuit against Conoco...

Knowing the impact that the construction of highways and the activities of oil companies have induced, we have found it necessary to take action at an international level because our demands and our proposals are not heeded by the national government. We have considered it critical to take this issue to international forums. With the cooperation of the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, an organization of lawyers in San Francisco, we have petitioned the OAS (Organization of American States) to intervene and mediate these conflicts. The problems between indigenous peoples and the Ecuadorian government are truly very big, and for this reason we believe that the mediation of an international organization like the OAS is important. In this way we can conduct serious discussions, that will result in solutions that address in the most

just possible way, the interests of indigenous peoples and of the society in general.

SAIIC: 1992 is approaching... What does the future hold for Indian peoples and their relationships with the international community?

We the indigenous peoples of Ecuador, are concerned by the fact that today, as we approach the 500th anniversary since the European invasion of America - the so-called "discovery of America" - the governments of the world still have not committed themselves to seriously think through the policies needed in order to construct a harmonious relationship with indigenous peoples. Oppression and exploitation still exist, and governments continue to permit genocide in indigenous territories. Now the process is not so blatant, it's not with rifles and bullets, but with other strategies which kill us culturally and physically - contamination of the rivers, destruction of nature, the looting of territories and natural resources, the imposition of religious and educational systems that are alien to us. Faced with this, we the indigenous peoples of the continent, have a moral and historical responsibility to take this date, the 500th anniversary, very seriously and to begin discussing future continental alliances. The continental conference held in Quito in July of 1990 was a very important precedent. If we want to keep moving toward the future with common proposals and objectives, it is necessary to continue our work at the continental level. Only in this way, can we create the groundwork and the conditions necessary for an alliance of indigenous peoples.

