



Photo: Enterprise/Petrol/Som Fe pecking machinery up the Chambira river by Ritchie Witzig

The Urarina, who call themselves "Kachá", meaning "the people," are a semi-nomadic Amazonian people who have inhabited the Chambira and Urituyacu river basins north of the Marañon river in Peru for at least 500 years. The Urarina and the Mayorunas (Matses) remain the largest untitled Amazonian Indigenous groups in Peru. However, the relative isolation of the Urarina has been interrupted as their traditional territory has been invaded by colonists, loggers, river traders, and drug-voyeur tourists. All of these groups have brought significant disease pressure on the Urarina that threatens their way of life and survival as documented in the article published in *Abya Yala News* Vol. 10, Number 2 (Summer 1996).

Urarina Survival Update: Continued Resource Exportation and Disease Importation by Foreigners and Newly Initiated by Multinational Oil Companies

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Resource Exploitation Update

The most recent and grave threat to Urarina survival is disease importation caused by the three multinational oil companies who entered their territory in late January 1997 to build an oil drilling site for petroleum extraction.

The Urarina people live in a flood zone that is projected to have significant oil reserves. Three multinational oil companies began drilling from the Chambira oil field located at Santa Martha on the Chambira river. Santa Martha is an old Urarina community located in the heart

of Urarina land that was temporarily vacated due to the semi-nomadic nature of Urarina culture. The Chambira oil fields are part of Block 3 owned by Petroperu, the Peruvian national oil company, but the rights to drill directly on the Chambira river were transferred to Enterprise Oil Co., of Great Britain in 1996. The rights were sold because Petroperu did not have the capital to initiate drilling. Against the wishes of the public, the Peruvian government now wants to privatize Petroperu. The sale of the oil rights to Enterprise had the effect of privatizing the entire Chambira oil field without privatizing Petroperu.

Enterprise subcontracted Parker Oil Drilling Co. of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Santa Fe Petroleum Co. of Lima, to drill the Santa Martha well. Construction of the oil field started in January, 1997 and by May 1, Enterprise/Parker/Santa Fe had drilled a complete well but fortunately did not encounter enough oil to warrant further exploration. The latest news is that the company has moved to lot 32, which is just northwest of their original site and is still deep in Urarina territory, to pursue further exploration in the next two years with a government contract.

Spills Before Drills

Even before they struck oil, there were ecological disasters. On April 30, 1997, the steel bottom of a barge bringing up supply oil was punctured by a huge capirona (*Calycophyllum* sp.) tree 10 kilometers from the oil well, causing oil contamination of the entire Chambira river downstream. The barge was then towed upstream, moored at Santa Martha, and surrounded by pylons attempting to control the oil leak (see Figure 1). One Urarina cacique (leader) in the Hormiga river off the Chambira complained that the fish entering his grounds had been contaminated from the oil, and were swimming into the Hormiga looking for fresh water. Amazonian river dolphins (*Inia geoffrensis*) which were numerous in the Chambira river basin have since noticed to be scarce from the main Chambira. This is certainly only the first of many barge leaks as this accident occurred when the river level was at flood stage in the rainy season. The Chambira is a nar-

row river, at times only 30 meters wide. In the dry season when the river is 10 meters lower there are certain to be more accidents of this type. There are no studies ongoing by the government, any NGO, or the oil companies of this impending ecological destruction.

SIL and Missionary Control

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL or ILV- Instituto Linguistico de Verano) used an impostor Urarina "leader" to help the oil companies create an appearance of legitimacy in their invasion of Urarina land. The SIL is an evangelical organization of amateur and professional linguists who attempt to influence the societies in which they work by translating the Bible into native languages. SIL has had a representative (Ronald Manus) living intermittently in the Urarina community of Nueva Esperanza for the past 30 years. The Urarina have retained their culture and spirituality despite SIL's attempt to influence them. As the outside agency with the longest domicilial experience in Urarina territory, the SIL has never tried to empower the Urarina in any way to protect their lands. Colby and Dennett's recent book about oil exploitation in the Amazon, "Thy Will be Done" has documented that the history of the SIL has been to help divide Indigenous peoples and even help oil companies enter Indigenous areas. When the oil companies needed to gain entrance into Urarina land, they received the necessary help from the SIL. SIL helped arrange a paper deal that "allowed" the oil companies access to Santa Martha that was signed by

an Urarina individual under the control of the SIL and living in Nueva Esperanza. This Urarina man who signed the documents is not a leader of the Urarina, and only represents himself. The total "compensation" to the Urarina nation from this "agreement" was a speedboat and monthly promises of gasoline given to the impostor "leader". The total effect was to give an extra speedboat to SIL. Unfortunately, it is difficult to undo a fraudulent "contract" as described above quickly, and it enables the oil companies to establish themselves while the legal defense of the Urarina is being organized. As they have done elsewhere in the Western Amazon, the SIL have again proven with the Urarina that Indigenous self-determination is exactly the opposite of their mission.



Due to the recent widespread privatization of oil rights in Peru, the lot numbers have recently been changed. Oil exploration is currently taking place on lot 32 (formerly lot 8) in Urarina territory.

Photo: www.ecojusticia.com.pe/PERUPETRO/IMAGES/AMPS

Disease Importation

Multinational oil exploration = Malaria, pertussis, and environmental contamination

Oil drilling teams are renowned for transporting new strains of disease into territories they exploit. The oil exploration and drilling teams are based in the field with support offices in Iquitos and Lima, but their personnel are imported from various areas in Peru, the United States, and Europe. The Santa Fe Iquitos office use the small Nanay river port community of Santa Clara to load all their equipment onto barges for transport to the Chambira. Santa Clara is currently suffering the most intense and drug resistant *P. falciparum* epidemic of any area in Peru, as well as an outbreak of pertussis (whooping cough).

very real danger that resistant *P. falciparum* strains are being transported to the Chambira by the oil workers loading the supply barges in Santa Clara.

The Peruvian government has no health post in the entire Chambira river basin. The nearest health post is in Maypuco, more than 1 week by canoe from Urarina territory. Colonists on the lower Chambira have access to boats and motors which can shuttle sick persons to Maypuco and on to Iquitos. The Urarina have no transportation except canoes.

As of May 1997, the Peruvian non-governmental organization CEDIA (Centro Para el Desarrollo del Indígena Amazónico) had counted over 3,200 Urarina in the Chambira basin alone

oil workers will take away any hope of controlling the *P. falciparum* epidemic that is currently decimating the Urarina people. Implementation of Convention 169, of which Peru is a signatory nation (1994) would help to protect the cultural rights of the Urarina as well as legally title their land. Legal recognition of their territorial boundaries would lead to self determination for the Urarina giving them some recourse to protect their way of life. 🐸

R. Witzig has performed medical surveys, disease treatment, supplied medicines, and trained Urarina village health workers (VHW) in basic medical and public health on seven separate trips to the Chambira basin since 1992, with a total of 13 months in the field. This continuing project which the author founded is the Amazonian Indigenous People's Health Project (AIPHP).



Pertussis appeared last February in the Chambira, after drilling had started- it was almost certainly brought by the oil teams. At least seven persons died from the two villages around Santa Martha. The Urarina have not received the DTP vaccine which protects from pertussis, and pertussis can be among the most lethal diseases in children with multiple infections.

Over sixty percent of the *P. falciparum* strains in Santa Clara near to Iquitos are resistant to chloroquine and pyrimethamine/sulfadoxine, the two cheapest and most used drugs against *P. falciparum* in Peru. The *P. falciparum* strains in the Chambira river still respond to pyrimethamine /sulfadoxine, but supplies are small and infrequent. There is a

(there are also Urarina in the Uritiyacu river and in affluents of the Corrientes river). The final number will likely include over 4,000 individuals, a large number for a remote Amazonian people.

Even though it has only just begun, the oil exploitation in Urarina territory has resulted in both serious health impacts and environmental degradation. If it continues at this pace, the cultural, biological, and ecological effects of oil exploration on the Urarina will likely be irreversible. The Urarina do not marry outside their group and sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS are not yet a problem in the communities. Cultural breakdown from exposure to oil workers may alter this trend. New drug resistant strains of malaria brought in by



Photo: Kichie Witzig

The author has documented the epidemics of measles, acute respiratory illnesses, cholera, and malaria affecting the Urarina. His previous trip in May, 1997, found one of the three VHW's dead from malaria, and widespread malaria in the entire Chambira basin. This was the first trip after the oil drilling started, and all of the Urarina communities were traumatized by the incursion of heavy equipment into their river. The pertussis epidemic in the communities around the oil drilling site was documented, which the oil workers likely introduced. Seven Urarina had died of pertussis in those villages alone since February 1997. The author is the only person (domestic or foreign) to work with the Urarina to document and treat their medical problems. The authors are currently working on malaria projects in Iquitos, Peru.