

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

the military who insist that Indian lands in the frontier zone threaten national security and the maintenance of Brazilian sovereignty.

This effort by the Senate is one more obstacle to the already slow process of demarcating Indian lands in Brazil. According to the bill, future demarcations would require the approval of the National Congress. Additional provisions would require the President to consult with the government of the state in which the Indian Area is proposed. These rules would make the demarcation of Indian lands anywhere extremely difficult, if not impossible.

From CIMI (Indianist Missionary Council).

More of the Same Under Paraguay's "Democratic" Government

Indigenous peoples in Paraguay have yet to reap the benefits of democracy, which was restored in 1989 after more than three decades of military dictatorship. Little has changed for Paraguay's Indigenous peoples since General Alfredo Stroessner's overthrow in 1989. In fact, many of the country's Indigenous communities have been fighting increased pressures to force them off their lands, as well as government indifference to their needs.

"We have title to our land, but it has been invaded by more than 200 peasant families. Our forest has been destroyed, our wild fruit trees have been uprooted and tossed aside without pity, the animals in the jungle have been killed off and we are going hungry," said Nobeito Romero, an elder in the Mbyá-Guaraní community, located in Ypaú in the southern department of Caazapa. Dozens of similar conflicts are being overlooked, or played down, by President Carlos Wasmosy's government.

In 1993, the Indigenous community in Ypaú managed to have some of its territory demarcated as an Indigenous reserve. The community of Ypaú was given 2,600 hectares of natural forests and swamps to share with two other communities. However, this has not put an end to the land invasions which began in 1989. The most recent land invasion in Ypaú began this past April, an official in the Ministry of Agriculture and Ranching's Farm Credit Office is reportedly a principal backer of this invasion. Three months after campesinos began invading the Indigenous lands, the Justice Ministry ordered police to dislodge the invaders. Yet, no action has been taken.

The Paraguayan government's position in relation to Indigenous communities is characterized by a double standard. Paraguay has one of the best laws on Indigenous rights in Latin America, but pays little attention to it. Instead, according to the Indigenous rights group Professional Socio-Anthropological and Legal Services, the government has actually tried to paralyze the progress of Indigenous communities and allied NGOs.

Information from Latinamerica Press, Lima, Peru.

Indian Lands in US and Canada Targeted for Nuclear Dumping

Nuclear waste produced throughout the United States could soon end up in the lands of the Meadow Lake Cree Reserve in Canada's Saskatchewan province. If plans under consideration by tribal councils, nuclear power companies and government agencies come to fruition, this would be the final stop in a long chain of nuclear waste production and storage housed on, or adjacent to, Indian lands.

The US Department of Energy and a potential waste recipient, Atomic Energy of Canada LTD, are considering construction of a permanent nuclear waste dump on the Meadow Lake Cree Reserve. The Meadow Lake Tribal Council has supported this proposal. In their current Economic Initiatives Report, the Council touts the dump as an economic boon for the tribe's 8,000 members.

In promoting nuclear waste as the cure for economic ills, the Council follows in the footsteps of the Mescalero Tribal Council in New Mexico, which has offered the Mescalero reservation as a temporary nuclear storage site. In Feb. 1994, officials of the Meadow Lake Cree and the Canadian government visited the Mescalero Reservation, and are reportedly working on an agreement within which the Mescalero would act as temporary holder and broker of US nuclear waste—which would then be shipped on to Cree lands. Mescalero Tribal President Wendell Chino is currently negotiating with thirty-two utilities and three nuclear companies for storage of their waste, according to a Greenpeace representative. These plans may have been forestalled by a tribal plebiscite in which Mescalero members categorically rejected proposals for nuclear waste storage.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has paved the way for international shipping of nuclear waste. Irradiated fuel is a non-tariff item within the trade agreement, making it economic to ship nuclear waste into Canada. The only requirement is access to temporary and permanent storage sites. For this, Indigenous lands have been targeted, just as they have always been for nuclear testing, uranium mining and fuel enrichment.

Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network characterizes this as "a plot by government and industry to take advantage of Indian territories." He adds, "They know that we don't have environmental codes or infrastructures that would protect us from storage of waste. Our network and our constituents have been vehemently opposed to the federal strategy to site nuclear facilities on our lands. It has to be stopped. If our elected tribal officials—and some of them are puppets of the government—won't stop it, our grassroots organizations will."