

ECUADOR

New Road Brings Multinationals To Runa Land

Threats to Indian land in the Ecuadorian Amazon have reached crisis proportions in the area around Loreto in Napo Province, home to approximately 3,000 Quichua-speaking Runa living over an area of 200,000 hectares.

The menace to Indian land and culture has been clear to the Loreto Runa since the discovery of oil in the Ecuadorian Amazon in the 1970's. Neighboring Archidona Runa living in the center of development were the first to lose their lands and can no longer obtain sufficient food from their reduced resource base. Pressure on Loreto Runa land is more recent, dating from the construction of the Loreto-Coca road in 1981-83. In response, the Loreto Runa have organized with other native communities to try to obtain title to their land. Between 1982 and 1984 the San José Runa cleared surveyor's lines in accordance with national law that allows them to determine their traditional boundaries. However, since 1984 no land titles have been granted to Indian communities.

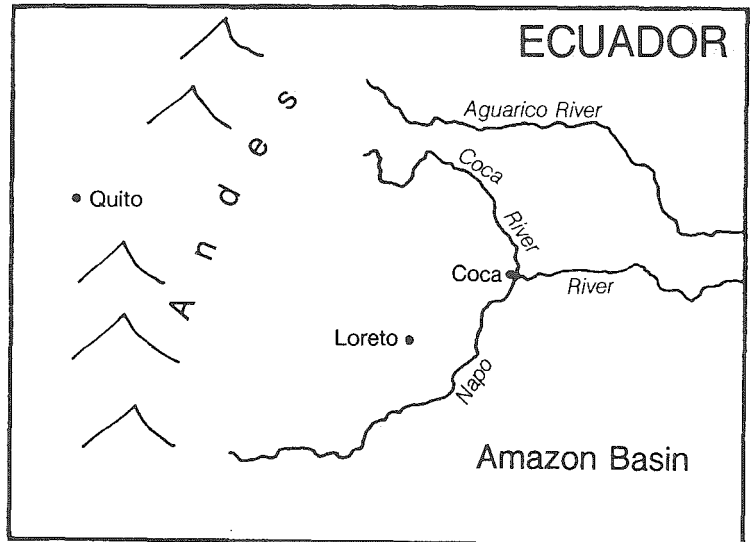
Instead, in mid-1984 a forest reserve of 11,000 hectares was established by the government in the Loreto area and declared to be "empty of all human settlement." Right to use the forest reserve was to be awarded to African palm oil enterprises. Although the "conservation zones" were rescinded in May, 1985, pressure on the Loreto area continues.

The Confederation of Indian Nations in the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) states that the government, multinationals, and large firms are working together to usurp Indian land (see *SAIIC Newsletter*, Summer, 1986, p. 8). In September, 1985, IERAC, the national land-granting agency, designated 60,000 hectares between the Napo and Aguarico Rivers to multinationals for the cultivation of African palm oil. British Petroleum was awarded a concession of 200,000 hectares in the Loreto area, and in February, 1986, IERAC announced a major new colonization project of 120,000 hectares along the Loreto-Coca road, an area where the company Plywood has been harvesting lumber for several years.

Amanecer Indio, the publication of CONFENIAE, reports that the Indian federation FOIN conducted courses to prepare the Loreto Runa to defend themselves. Delegates from 20 Runa communities have met to develop plans to legalize community land.

—Nickie Irvine

Nickie Irvine and Ellen Speiser are making a film that features a community in the Loreto area of Ecuador. It focuses on Indian knowledge of natural resources which permits sustainable use of the rain-forest. For more information, call (415) 826-8432.



Sources in Ecuador also report the following developments there:

CONFENIAE reports that many Indians are working on the African palm plantations because their traditional sources of livelihood have been destroyed. Wages on the plantations are low and efforts to organize a union have been blocked by police.

The community Corazon del Oriente near the Huashito River (northwest of Coca) has encountered thousands of dead fish killed by pesticides dumped into the river by an African palm plantation. According to CONFENIAE, for every hectare of rainforest land cleared for palm plantations, approximately 94,000 plants are destroyed. It is estimated that one million trees are being cut daily in the Amazon.

Attacks on Indian communities in Ecuador are not limited to the Napo region. The Confederation of Indian Nations of Ecuador (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, CONACNIE) has charged that on September 1 the Shuar community of Kukush was invaded by homesteaders. One person was killed and three were injured. In March, local authorities and military and civil police forcibly removed Indian families, including children and elders, from their homes at Centro Shuar Washikiat. Seven homes were destroyed there.

The critical situation for Indian people in Ecuador becomes even more complex as the government attempts to create confusion and diffuse the focus of Indian action by creating "official" Indian organizations which have no grassroots support in Indian communities. President León Febres Cordero and the ministry of education have also authorized the return of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, an evangelical group that was expelled by a previous government. According to CONFENIAE, SIL works to undermine Indian cultures, impose capitalist values, destroy Indian organizations, and co-opt Indians, such as those who are trained as technicians and then contribute to the destruction of the Amazon environment.

The external debt and the reduced price of oil have intensified the crisis which confronts Indian people as well as the rest of Ecuadorian society. The Ecuadorian Front for Human Rights indicates that of a total population of 8 million people, there are more than 350,000 unemployed. At least 1,200,000 other people barely subsist with minimal employment and live in extreme poverty. Inequality in the distribution of income is dramatic. The poorest 40 percent of the population receive only 13.3% of the gross national product, while the wealthiest 1.6 per cent receive 12 percent.

For further information on the African palm threat to Indian people in Ecuador, see Andean Focus, Vol. III, no. 4, 1986 (198 Broadway, New York, NY 10038).

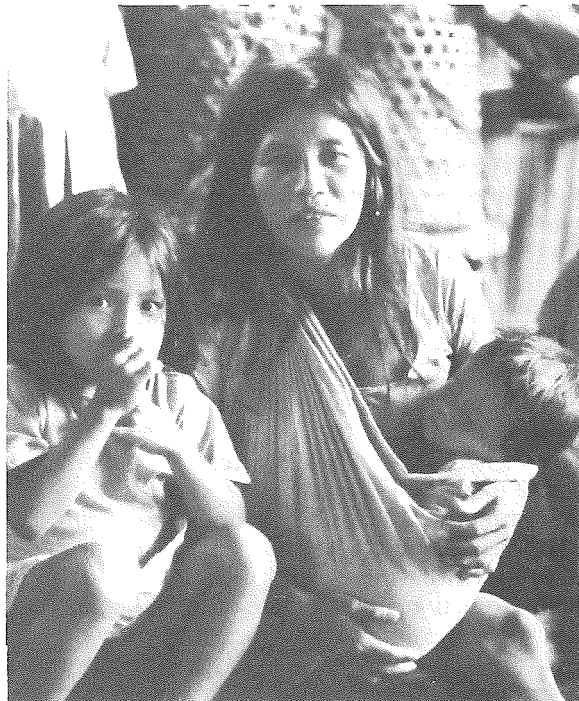


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Runa from Loreto area of Ecuador.