
Peru: Amazon peoples, bastions of resistance

Since 9 April, the communities of the Peruvian Amazon have started what they have called an “indefinite strike” all over the Peruvian Amazon, in response to the failure of the Congress of the Republic to repeal six decrees considered prejudicial to the indigenous peoples. These decrees were issued by the Executive in the framework of the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and involve the imposition of industries destroying the Amazon and its inhabitants, such as mining, oil exploitation and timber plantations.

The International Human Rights Federation (IHRF) considered that the decrees threaten the rights of the Amazon indigenous peoples (1) , while the Congress of the Republic also adopted a Report by a Special Commission, proposing that some of these decrees be revoked (2).

The seriousness of the threat that involves putting the Amazon up “for sale” is reflected in one of the examples quoted by the expert Roger Rumrill: “Oil plot No. 76, covering one million five hundred hectares, will install 18 seismic lines, build 166 heliports, open up 1944 unloading areas and install 166 camping sites. This plot will literally swallow up the Amarakaime Community Reserve and will operate in the buffer zones of the Manu and Bahuaja-Sonene National Parks and in the Tambopata-Candamo Reserve. This means that it will seriously affect one of the areas containing the world’s greatest biodiversity.” (3) In spite of protests, President Alan Garcia authorized the Perenco Company to invest 2 billion dollars in oil activities at Lot 67, located in Loreto. (4)

The Amazon protest started last July (see WRM Bulletin No. 132), although subsequently it was suspended because the Congress of the Republic committed itself to address the claim. However, as stated by AIDESEP leaders “Far from keeping their promises, the legislative issued Law 29317 that modifies and incorporates various articles into decree 1090, known as the Forestry and Wildlife Law.”(5) And so the mobilizations were reinitiated.

In a direct communication with WRM, the organization Grufides reported that “socio-environmental disputes have grown in the country. In Cajamarca, mining is the source of innumerable disputes that have become increasingly violent because of the impunity provided to those that hold power at the regional level. Hundreds of peasants can find that their water has been affected, such as the peasants using the Quilish canal in Porcon –in addition to being denounced and penalized when they react against this– while the mining company responsible for this pollution goes unpunished. In Choropampa, San Juan and Magdalena, thousands of peasants suffered mercury poisoning and even now are demanding solutions to their health problems that have not been addressed, either by the State or by the company that caused this serious accident. In the Province of San Marcos, two teachers, a regional councillor and seven peasants may be sent to prison in the next few days for having protested against a Brazilian mining company that went as far as hiring criminals to threaten the organized peasant leaders. The laws menace peasants who are defending their rights, while the responsible company officials remain in total impunity and are supported by authorities at all government levels. These past weeks have seen the greatest strike ever in the history of Peru.”

As reported by Servindi, Kichua and Arabela indigenous peoples blocked the passage of vessels

along the Napo and Curaray rivers in protest against the failure to comply with the document signed between the authorities and the Repsol oil company.” (6) Also AIDSESEP has been informing of the several actions of hundreds of indigenous people, peasant farmers and civil society members who joined in the march from different parts of the region. In the Santiago, Cenepa and Santa María de Nieva River basins, they marched to protest against the mining and oil companies that are trying to take over their lands. The highway that connects Yurimaguas and Tarpoto was blockaded with logs and stones at the kilometre 46 mark, while inhabitants of indigenous communities in the San Martín region set up a road block at kilometre 5 of the Fernando Belaunde Terry highway in the Maronilla district. In the Alto Amazonas region, 7,000 peasants and indigenous people from the Shawi, Cocama and Cocamilla communities occupied the port of El Vado in Yurimaguas, forcing a halt to trade and land and river transportation. In Bagua, the highway that leads to the district of Santa María de Nieva was blockaded with dozens of cars. Asháninka indigenous people occupied the Atalaya airport in Ucayali. Machiguenga indigenous people from Bajo Urubamba and Alto Urubamba, members of COMARU, blocked vehicular traffic and river transportation into Bajo Urubamba. The headquarters of the sub-region of Santa Clotilde in the district capital of Napo was occupied by Kichwa and Arabela indigenous people, with the backing of residents from numerous surrounding districts and Santa Clotilde, which is situated near the midway point of the Napo River. Blockades were also set up across the upper and lower stretches of the river, which further obstructed the passage of boats travelling between Iquitos and the Ecuadorian border. Hundreds of Awajún and Wampi indigenous people marched on Petroperú Stations 5 and 6 – which form part of the Northern Peru oil pipeline – and occupied the facilities. In the Plaza de Armas de Jaén, residents of the city of Baguá started a protest vigil against the policies of the García government. The Kichwa people of the Alto Putumayo region, on the Colombian border, joined in the Amazon general strike, while Andean indigenous communities staged protests in support of their Amazonian brothers and sisters. (7) According to information provided by Thomas Quirynen, collaborator in the South for Catapa, three petrol stations (nr. 5, 6 and 7) were occupied by the protesters as a direct result of the radicalisation of the strike; because of this action the pumping of crude oil has been suspended (see full article and photos at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Peru/strike.html>).

However, the demands of the Amazon peoples are ignored by the Government and in general, the mass media does not report on what is actually happening. On Saturday 9 May the Government decreed a state of emergency in nearly all the Amazon territory, leaving the door open to violation of the human rights of the Amazon citizens who are struggling to defend their lives from the threat of uncontrolled encroachment by oil, mining, gas and forestry companies.

On 10 May, President Alan Garcia ordered repression of the Awajun and Wampi indigenous peoples who were protesting on the Corral Quemado bridge at Bagua Grande. They were dispersed by force with the use of tear gas, blows and bullets resulting in ten people injured, three of them seriously, seven arrests and several disappearances.

Indigenous, peasant and agrarian organizations from all over the country announced that they would intensify measures “until we have Legislative Decrees 994, 1064, 1020, 1080, 1081, 1083, 1089, 1060, 995 and the Water Resources Law repealed.” (8) Indigenous organizations participating in the Amazon-Andean National Meeting in preparation for the Fourth Continental Summit Meeting of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of the Abya Yala, to take place this month in Puno, declared that “Although these laws have been declared unconstitutional both by the Constitutional Tribunal and by the Multiparty Congress Commission, there is no political will to repeal them.” They convened the indigenous communities from all over the country to comply with the “National Rising” to be held as from 7 July, as a measure of protest.

The testimonial of another Peruvian friend, whose identity we will keep anonymous, reflects the situation: "I am a leader of this strike and I have been threatened with death. This doesn't matter, if I must lose my life for my brothers and sisters, my children and the world, then so be it. We need the world to know about our struggles. Give us a hand to save the planet. We have no economic support, we do what we can. Our Shawi, Aguaruna and Wambiasa brothers and sisters, we will not lose faith; if it is necessary we will sacrifice our lives to defend our lands and our forests. Friends, be our voices in the world. Thank you a thousand times on behalf of our Mother Nature."

- (1) "Perú: FIDH insta derogar DL que atentan contra la Amazonía", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11439>
- (2) "Perú: Congreso aprueba Informe que deroga decretos legislativos", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11357>
- (3) "Perú: Estado de emergencia contra los pueblos indígenas amazónicos", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/opinion/11436>
- (4) "Perú: García autorizó inversión de Perenco por \$2 mil millones en Loreto", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11155>
- (5) "Perú: AIDSEP y Ejecutivo crean Mesa de Diálogo para atender demandas de indígenas amazónicos", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/10713>
- (6) Information from AIDSEP, <http://www.aidesep.org.pe>
- (7) "Perú: Amazónicos inician paro indefinido por incumplimiento del Congreso", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/10257>
- (8) "Perú: Andinos y amazónicos acuerdan radicalizar protesta", Servindi, <http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/11414>.