
Colombia: The U'wa Indigenous People resist oil exploration

On 15 December 2006, the Colombian government made public its decision to reinitiate oil exploration activities in the Siriri and Catleya Blocks located in the Departments of Arauca, Santander, North of Santander and Boyacá, in the northwest of the country, in U'wa territory.

For over a decade the U'wa have been telling the world what oil means to them, culturally and spiritually, and have repeatedly denounced the consequences that oil exploitation would have on their territory and their culture. They have even offered their lives to defend themselves from so-called "development." Their struggle and conviction have inspired other peoples around the world who have seen how the oil industry, only benefiting a few people, has destroyed their lives. With the excuse of development and progress these projects are imposed on them, only bringing destruction.

Various research workers and experts on environmental and social conflicts caused by the oil industry have witnessed the damage done and that will be done by oil exploration on the land and the lives of the U'wa. Ferry Lynn Karl, a lecturer at Stanford University in the United States made a very detailed analysis of the negative impacts of the Siriri/Catleya project on the ecosystems and on the social and economic situation of the indigenous people. She has also announced that this activity could also give rise to a state of violence in the region.

The Government decision implies disregard for the U'wa's right to their ancestral territories, including the soil and subsoil. The royal warrant granted by the Crown to the Tuneba Nation (U'wa) in the year 1802 ratified and delimited their jurisdiction to the present Departments of Casanare, Arauca, Boyaca, Santander, North of Santander and a part of Venezuelan territory. In turn, these rights were reaffirmed in Colombian Law 153 of 1887 and also by Article 332 of the 1991 Constitution. The decision by the Ministry of the Interior to continue with the Siriri/Catleya oil project also violates ILO Convention 169 and the recommendations agreed on in 1998 between the National Government and the U'wa People.

In the framework of the "Prior Consultation" process launched by the government for oil exploration and exploitation in U'wa territory, a consultation was made with the Arauca indigenous organization, Ascatidar, which gave rise to a negative response. ASOU'WA, the organization gathering the U'wa indigenous peoples from Santander, North of Santander and Boyaca replied negatively to the prior consultation. Even so, the Government has informed that it will convene the organizations to involve them in carrying out the Environmental Management Plan.

Over 120 organizations from Colombia and other parts of the world and some 30 people sent a letter to the Colombian President, Alvaro Uribe on 22/12/2006 stating their surprise and indignation over the decision to carry out oil exploration in U'wa territory. They ask for the decision authorizing seismic exploration on U'wa territory to be revised and the project to be definitively shelved.

Gubanu, an elder who is also a werjayu (wise man), went to the Capital district barefoot to launch a new stage in U'wa diplomacy. Together with Luis Tegria Sirakubo, president of the Association of Traditional Authorities and U'wa Councils, ASOU'WA, they held meetings in Bogotá with

representatives of the European Union, the Venezuelan embassy and innumerable social and non-governmental organizations supporting this people's opposition to oil activities on their territory. Gubanu achieved the objective entrusted to him by this people: the ratification of the U'wa vision regarding the oil issue, recently expressed on 12 October 2006, when they answered with a resounding "no" to the prior consultation process proposed by the Colombian government.

The U'wa delegates met with the press and expressed their view that with oil exploitation, not only is blood being extracted from Mother Earth, but she is also being left in very poor conditions. The old man stated that "It is for this reason that there is not as much fishing as before, it is hotter and the sacred ayu (coca plant leaf) used by the werjaya for spiritual work, is drying up."

For all these reasons and as affirmed by organizations supporting the U'wa struggle "the Siriri/Catleya oil project cannot continue. We want to tell you (President Uribe) that the U'wa are not alone, that we will continue to support them in their worthwhile struggle, that we will be by their side until the Colombian Government and the Ecopetrol and Repsol YPF oil companies understand that this territory is sacred and that cultures with principles cannot be bought."

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