
Colombia: International Mission and good news about the U'wa

From March 15-21, 2000, an International Mission, summoned by the major authorities of the Embera-Katio and U'wa indigenous peoples, visited Colombia to observe in the field their situation concerning the long conflict in which they are involved to defend their territorial and cultural rights. The mission was conformed by representatives of indigenous peoples of Ecuador and Panama, the World Rainforest Movement, Oilwatch, Friends of the Earth, International Rivers Network, Rios Vivos, and other human rights and environmental organizations.

The members of the mission that visited the U'wa Territory at Arauca Department, in East Colombia, could see with their own eyes how the U'wa were organized in a camp of more than 2,500 people at Gibraltar, counting with the support of peasants' and workers' organizations. Peace and solidarity reigned in the camp, in spite of provocations by army personnel that were installed nearby. The adverse effects on the forest, soil, water and people of the works that Oxy's concessionaires were undertaking to open the oil well Gibraltar 1 were also observed. Additionally, the mission met Colombian authorities, ONIC (National Peoples Organization of Colombia), and affected people at the site, and reviewed all of the relevant documents related to the case. The mission was unable to interview staff from Occidental due to their unwillingness to do so.

As a preliminary result of its work the mission emphasized that the present situation is critical from an environmental and social point of view due to works in course, that there are contradictions between what has been declared by the authorities and what was observed at the site, and that there exists a tendency to resolve the conflicts with military involvement disregarding the social and environmental aspects which originate them.

Among other steps, it was recommended that the environmental license for Oxy issued on September 21st 1999 by the Ministry of the Environment be revoked; that guarantees are given and the integrity of the ancestral territory of the U'wa village is respected; that an investigation on the violent evictions against the U'wa that occurred last January and February is immediately undertaken; and that the civil authorities guarantee the legal right of peaceful protests by the affected people.

On March 31st a Colombian court ordered Oxy to halt all construction work on the Gibraltar 1 well site on sacred ancestral land of the U'wa people. The judge ruled that the drilling on the site would violate "fundamental rights" of the U'wa people, including their right to life. Nevertheless, the last word has not been yet said. Even if the court's decision is an important step, the injunction speaks of the suspension of the project and not of its cancellation. Additionally, Oxy is a powerful actor and the Colombian government itself -in spite of nice words regarding cultural diversity and even indigenous rights established in the Constitution- seems to be more interested in promoting oil exploitation than in respecting the rights of the U'wa. But the U'wa count on national and international solidarity and especially on their own strength to defend their rights.

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