

The Achuar and Talisman Energy

Indigenous Rights, Justice, and Corporate Accountability in the Peruvian Amazon



“We have seen with our own eyes how the company has worked here the last 10 years. Now the rivers are polluted, the land polluted, the air polluted, the forest too.”

- Pitiur Unti Saant, leader and elder from Unkum community next to Talisman’s operations

The remote Amazon headwaters along the border of Peru and Ecuador are one of the most biodiverse places on Earth. This remote region, up to a week’s travel by bus, boat and canoe from the capital city of Lima, is home to over 11,000 Achuar indigenous people. As their ancestors have done before them, they hunt, fish, and raise crops in the Corrientes, Pastaza, and Morona river basins.

Today, the Achuar’s way of life and survival is threatened by international oil companies exploring and drilling for oil.

Corrientes

The oil fields under eastern Achuar territory, on the Corrientes River, have been drilled for oil since the 1970’s, first by US-based Occidental Petroleum (Oxy) and now by Argentina’s Pluspetrol. For over three decades Oxy cut costs by dumping 9 billion gallons of ‘produced waters’ directly into the rivers instead of re-injecting them. These ‘produced waters’ contain highly toxic substances such as barium, lead and arsenic and together with hundreds of ongoing oil spills have destroyed hunting and fishing grounds and left the Achuar with severe health problems.

Adults and local children have tested positive for dangerously high blood-lead levels, and local residents cite countless tales of unexplained diseases, tumors, skin ailments and miscarriages from oil exposure. Fish and local game are not fit for consumption and fraught with contamination, and the soil is also no longer fit to produce agricultural crops on which the Achuar depend for subsistence.

In response, the Achuar have mobilized through peaceful means, forcing Pluspetrol to re-inject ‘produced waters,’ and filing a class action lawsuit against Occidental Petroleum in the U.S.

Pastaza

West of the Corrientes, the Pastaza and Morona river basins have until recently remained free of oil drilling. Today, Canadian company Talisman Energy is drilling exploratory wells in Block 64 in the middle of the Achuar peoples’ ancestral territory, despite steadfast opposition.

Talisman first invested in Block 64 in 2004 with Oxy, and as of 2012 they operate and own 50% of Block 64 and four other exploration blocks that together cover 8 million acres (33,000km²) of tropical rainforest.



Lake Alianza Cristiana: Oil blocks 64 and 101 lie over this lake and the streams that feed it, abundant fishing grounds for the Achuar and Kichwa people

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Block 64 covers a unique wetlands ecosystem between the Pastaza and Morona river basins that is a crucial fishing and hunting grounds for hundreds of surrounding indigenous families. The wetlands drain into Lake Rimachi, the largest lake in the Peruvian Amazon and part of the Pastaza River Wetland complex, a site acknowledged under the Ramsar Convention as one of the most productive aquatic ecosystems in the Amazon rainforest.

Given the Achuar's experience with Oxy and the risks of oil drilling in a crucial watershed in the heart of Achuar territory, the majority of Achuar within Block 64 have adopted a steadfast opposition to any new oil activities on their lands. In 2008, 2010 and 2011 Achuar leaders traveled many days from their communities deep in the rainforest to Talisman's headquarters in Calgary, Canada, to demand that Talisman respect the Achuar peoples' rights and immediately withdraw from their ancestral homelands, but the company has continued to ignore their demands.

“We demand that the Peruvian government immediately annuls the contracts for blocks 64 and 101 and that Talisman immediately withdraws from our territory.”

— Achuar declaration, March 2010

Talisman has justified the continuation of seismic testing and exploratory drilling by saying it is working with the agreement of a handful of communities, which it claims are the only people directly affected by their operations. The Achuar point out that drilling affects key hunting grounds, water resources, and sacred lands important to the well-being of all Achuar communities, and activities must not continue without the consent of all the Achuar people.

The Achuar also accuse the company of fomenting division amongst the Achuar people. They have brought charges against Talisman for transporting a group of armed pro-oil community members to confront protesters at a Talisman drilling platform in May 2009 and nearly provoking a violent conflict.

Territory

The Pastaza and Morona river basins have been occupied by the Achuar for many generations. Streams, hunting grounds, old farms, sacred waterfalls and burial sites all tell a story and connect the Achuar with their ancestors. Achuar territory provides everything they need: medicinal plants, roofing palms, blowpipes for hunting, rivers full of fish, and spiritual sites where they search for a vision.

The Peruvian State has recognised Achuar land rights with “Native Community” titles, but these titles only cover a third of ancestral lands.

Over the past six years the Achuar have documented and mapped everything important to them in a vast territory of over 2.5 million acres shared by over 40 Achuar communities. In September 2011, they formally petitioned the government to respect their self-determination, including legal recognition of their ancestral territory, annulment of existing oil blocks and a government guarantee of no future oil drilling in their ancestral lands.

Amazon Watch works to protect the rainforest and advance the rights of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin

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