



AMAZON WATCH



Photo credit: ASOU'WA

ISSUE BRIEF: COLOMBIA'S U'WA PEOPLE

"For the U'wa nation, it is evident that resource extraction projects have caused the most strident violations of human rights...and our territorial, cultural, and environmental rights. Oil projects have generated increasing military presence and armed conflict, and are contributing to social disintegration along with the physical and cultural disappearance of not only the U'wa but the other indigenous peoples of Colombia." – Proposals from the U'wa nation to the Colombian government (April 2014)

Colombia's U'wa indigenous people have come to be a global symbol of the fight for human rights and survival in the face of environmental calamity. Since the 1990's, their struggle to keep oil activities out of their ancestral territory has inspired impressive solidarity from around the planet. Though the stakes are high—as demonstrated by the killing of three U.S. citizens in 1999—the U'wa commitment to protect their culture and environment remains steadfast. They continue to request international solidarity to strengthen and support the campaign to defend their territories.

BACKGROUND

The U'wa are a peaceful indigenous community of roughly 7,000 people who live traditionally in the remote Andes of northeastern Colombia near the border with Venezuela. Known as the "thinking people," the U'wa consider themselves guardians of the forest and the species therein. For centuries they have protected large areas of their forest homeland by prohibiting all human access, including their own in certain sacred areas. These tracts now function as de facto biological reserves for such species as jaguars, spectacled bears and toucans.

The U'wa preserve their culture and tradition through song. Spiritual beliefs dictate that they maintain harmony between the layers of creation: such sacred things as earth, water, oil, mountains and sky. The U'wa hold that, "Oil is the blood of Mother Earth ... to take the oil is, for us, worse than killing your own mother. If you kill the earth, then no one will live."

The U'wa have continued to express unwavering opposition to any oil projects within their sacred territory. In the past, they have stated that they are willing to die to keep oil drilling out of their ancestral homeland. In 1997, in alliance with Colombian and international organizations, the U'wa launched a successful international campaign targeting Occidental Petroleum (OXY) that eventually led to the company's withdrawal from an oil project in 2002.

ENTER ECOPETROL

Following OXY's departure, rights to the Sirirí and Catleya oil concessions overlapping U'wa territory were transferred to Ecopetrol, Colombia's state-owned oil company and one of Latin America's largest corporations. In recent years, the company has been stepping up exploratory drilling around the Gibraltar



Photo credit: ASOU'WA

The Magallanes gas exploration project as of March 2014, with the sacred Cubogón River visible in the background

platforms—located on the northern boundary of the recognized U'wa Unified Reserve—against steadfast opposition of U'wa communities in this region. Since 2007 there has been an influx of heavy machinery and equipment into the area, as well as infrastructure and a migration of oil workers destructive to the region.

Given the close proximity of the Gibraltar wells to the U'wa community, oil operations there have direct social and environmental impacts. These include health impacts from pollution, social conflict between outside workers and local indigenous peoples, and most notably violence and armed conflict spawned by oil installations. Ecopetrol activities have been accompanied by militarization as well as increased presence of guerrilla groups in the region.

MAGALLANES: THE CURRENT THREAT

In late February of 2014 an influx of heavy equipment into the region alerted the U'wa of a new project—the Magallanes gas exploration well. Similar to Gibraltar, this is immediately outside the limits of their titled resguardo (reservation). In a February 26th public statement, the U'wa wrote, “We are very concerned given that the sacred Cubogón or Keramá River, which feeds into the Arauca River, is but 500 meters from the point where the exploration activities are being carried out. Continuing the project would initiate a slow and silent death of the river.” They concluded the statement requesting that allies pressure the Colombian government to suspend the project.

On March 25th of that year, illustrating the U'wa claim that oil brings with it armed conflict to their doorstep, left-wing guerrillas bombed the Caño Limón – Coveñas oil pipeline, which crosses U'wa ancestral and titled territory. In this case, the attack was carried out in La China, within the bounds of the Unified U'wa Resguardo. According to an April 14th statement by the U'wa, the immediate impact of the bombing was to, “induce an abortion and left both an adult and a minor in a regional health center because of smoke from the explosion.”



U'wa Association lawyer Aura Tegria Cristancho, at the occupation of the pipeline bombing site La China

Thereafter, the U'wa prohibited Ecopetrol from repairing the damaged section of the tube, effectively paralyzing transportation of oil through the country's second largest pipeline. According to media reports, this caused up to US\$8 million daily in forgone oil revenues for the government. The government opened a dialogue with the U'wa while increasing military presence around La China. The message to the U'wa was clear—negotiate with the government and allow the pipeline repair, or face violent eviction from the protest site.

The U'wa outlined a clear set of demands for the government: (1) Expand U'wa territory to reflect their colonial land title; (2) Cancel the Magallanes project, dismantle the Gibraltar wells, and nullify any other mining concessions on U'wa territory; (3) End interference of the National Parks administration in the area of the U'wa resguardo overlapped by the Cocuy National Park; (4) Guarantee oversight by the government's control entities like the People's Defender office; and (5) Receive compensation for damage.

MAY DAY: A "MINIMAL AGREEMENT"

After several rounds of dialogues, including a first in which the U'wa broke off talks because the government's counter-offer was considered to be an "insult," the U'wa reached an agreement with the government on May 1st. In a scorching statement the U'wa said, "The U'wa Nation ratifies its position of defense and resistance in our just and humble cause. Yesterday, we saw no other option than offering free access to the reparation of the Caño Limón oil pipeline in order to avoid our U'wa people – and the brothers and sisters from social sectors in Cubará and Arauca – who have been in La China and Magallanes being violently evicted and reliving the situation that happened in January of 2000."

The Colombian government's concessions to the U'wa included (1) Suspending the Magallanes gas exploration project for one month; (2) Allowing for the U'wa to recruit lawyers, academics, and others to carry out a study of the socio-environmental impacts of the Magallanes project; and (3) Establishing a joint commis-

sion to review the U'wa demands for territorial expansion. At the end of the one-month period the U'wa will hold another meeting with the Colombian government to look at next steps.

"At the end we arrived at some minimal agreements within the framework of healthy coexistence and in contribution to peace, integrity, and harmony," their statement continued. "Based upon this, we expect the National Government's faithful compliance with what we agreed."

But good faith on the part of the government and Ecopetrol is not to be assumed. The one-month timeframe for the socio-environmental study is already a bad sign, given that it is all but impossible to establish a credible team and have it carry out an adequate study in that short period. Also, at the time of publication of this document (12 May 2014), Ecopetrol has not allowed U'wa monitors into Magallanes to verify that work there has indeed been suspended.

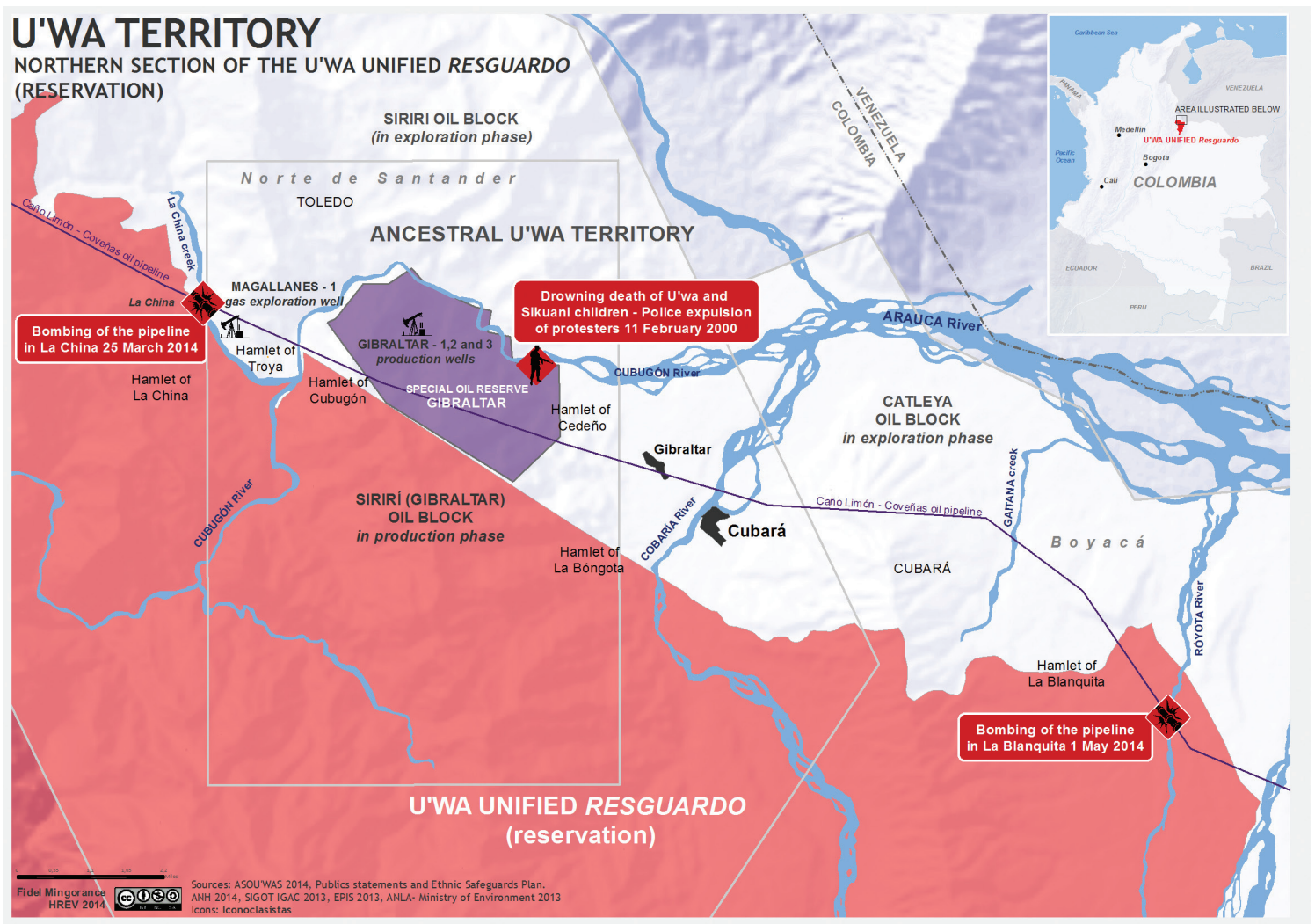




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ONGOING SOLIDARITY NEEDED

For nearly two decades the U'wa have been building international alliances to protect their homelands. This was a crucial element in influencing OXY's decision to desist from exploring in U'wa territory. The U'wa are

once again re-activating their campaign—with a mandate from their spiritual elders the Werjaya—and are in search of continued international solidarity.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

STAY INFORMED & SHARE

Read updates at AmazonWatch.org;
Connect on [Facebook.com/AmazonWatch](https://www.facebook.com/AmazonWatch)
and Twitter [@AmazonWatch](https://twitter.com/AmazonWatch).

TAKE ACTION

As the reactivated U'wa campaign evolves we'll need international voices to keep pressure on the Colombian government. Stay tuned and connected with Amazon Watch to learn how to add your voice to support the U'wa at critical moments.

SUPPORT THE CAUSE

We are currently raising direct financial support for the U'wa via the 'Help the U'wa defend their ancestral lands in Colombia' campaign on [Causes.com](https://www.causes.com). Help us reach our initial goal of US\$10,000!

EXPRESS SOLIDARITY

Send a direct message to the U'wa (in Spanish) to their collective institutional email address:
asociacionuwa2014@gmail.com

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

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